

Using play to help families learn: Evaluation of Trafford Hall's Playing 2 Learn Programme 2008-11

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Editorial Note and Acknowledgements

Laura Lane is a Research Officer in LSE Housing and Communities, CASE, London School of Economics. Liz Richardson is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Manchester, and a CASE Associate.

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Abstract

The report describes the results of a three-year evaluation by LSE Housing and Communities of a family learning programme called Playing 2 Learn. The Playing 2 Learn programme was open to vulnerable families from low income communities across England. It was delivered by a charity, Trafford Hall, home of the National Communities Resource Centre between 2008 and 2011. It consisted of 26 residential weekend events with 795 adult and child family members from a total of 205 families attending. The weekends used creative, low cost play activities to promote play-based learning. The evaluation used baseline data collected by the programme, self-reported short-, medium- and longer-term outcomes based on written feedback from 62% of participating families, in-depth interviews with the purposive sample of 20 families, assessments from referral agencies, interviews with delivery staff, and observations of the residential events.

It finds that the families participating in the programme experienced a series of pressures that undermined their ability to engage positively and spend time with their children at home, including family breakdown and formation, pressures of low-incomes, health and behavioural issues. Outcomes for families from the programme were assessed under four themes. First, there was improved family interaction over the short-, medium- and longer-terms, for example reading together and doing messy play. Second, parents' and carers' attitudes towards and input into children's

opportunities for play were also improved, including getting new ideas for affordable play activities and continuing to use them up to two years after attending the weekends. To the extent that the evaluation was able to measure, the impacts on younger children's ability to learn were much more limited. Fourthly, there were positive impacts on parents' and carers' participation in the community for around a quarter of respondents, and wider impacts on parents' and carers' self-esteem and confidence, primarily through the support of meeting other families in similar situations.

The report concludes that the value of the residential setting was to help families to experience new challenges. The experiential hands-on approach helped to generate long-lasting impacts. Many of the families on the programme were going through tough times that play alone could not resolve. The Programme succeeded in its goals to be a 'snapshot removed from the everyday', on which families could draw for inspiration when they return to their often challenging daily lives.

Keywords: Family intervention, family learning, play, vulnerable families, evaluation

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Executive Summary

Background

Playing 2 Learn was a Big Lottery funded family learning programme using creative and practical activities to help parents and other carers to improve children's learning abilities. The programme was open to families under stress from low-income communities across England. Based on the idea that 'families are the first teachers', the programme promoted play-based learning. The programme consisted of a series of 26 residential weekend events. Each weekend had around eight families attending with both adults and children. They were facilitated by professional staff, who demonstrated practical play activities, and worked with the participants to try out the activities using hands-on exercises. The weekends were intended to enable families to spend quality time together away from their home environments engaging in a range of cheap and accessible play activities. Play activities were designed to be adaptable and replicable in home environments. Trafford Hall, home of the National Communities Resource Centre (NCRC), is a national charity which supports low-income communities through training programmes, and is based near Chester in North West England. Trafford Hall organised and ran the programme, and provided the venue for the residential events.

In the three years between 2008 and 2011, there were 26 residential weekend events with a total of 205 families attending - 795 individual family members participated. Of this number, 288 adults (parents and carers) attended with 507 children. The average number of participants on each programme was 31. Around a quarter of the families involved were from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) background. Families attended from all regions of England; the majority (54%) were from outside the North West. Families from low income communities across England were contacted via support organisations such as community organisations and statutory family support services. Families were then nominated or invited to the Playing 2 Learn programme by these local support organisations.

An external evaluation was conducted by LSE Housing and Communities, a research centre at the London School of Economics and Political Science. The primary research done by LSE Housing and Communities was focused on an outcome evaluation (also known as a summative evaluation) which assessed how far the Programme had contributed towards improvements in key medium- and longer-term outcomes: family interaction; parents' and carers' attitudes towards and input into children's opportunities for play; younger children's ability to learn; parents' and carers' participation in the community, self-esteem and confidence. Self-reported short-term outcomes three months after the events were collected by Trafford Hall for around 62% of families, a total of 127 families, and are also presented here.

The work by LSE Housing and Communities focused on a sample of 20 families who participated in the Playing 2 Learn (P2L) programme between 2008 and 2010¹, around 10% of the total families participating in the programme in that period. The sample was selected to represent a range of family and household types (including number of children, lone and two-parent headed households, ethnic background), degree of severity of issues faced, and geographical location. We used baseline data collected as part of the Programme, and then conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with the sample of 20 families six to nine months after attending the Playing 2 Learn events. Five of the 20 families, made up of different family types, household composition and geographical locations, were interviewed again after 12-24 months. We also used a variety of other sources of evidence, including assessments by referral agencies, material produced as part of the weekend events, and the families' three month evaluations.

LSE Housing and Communities also undertook a light-touch process evaluation of the way the programme had been delivered (also known as a formative evaluation). We assessed how the programme was implemented, participant satisfaction with the events, the quality of the delivery of the weekend events, and relationships between Trafford Hall and the participants and referral agencies. We based this on feedback from participants and interviews with family support organisations who referred families to the programme, interviews with programme delivery staff at Trafford Hall, programme out-turn data such as attendance figures, and observations of the events.

Key Findings

Family contexts

The Playing 2 Learn programme was open to vulnerable families from low income communities across England. These families experienced a series of pressures that undermined their ability to engage and spend time with their children at home.

- While some families were experiencing particular periods of distress and upset, the majority had found ways to cope with everyday life. However, all of the families, whether coping or experiencing crises, felt that the demands upon them did not allow for quality time together as a family.
- The breakdown and formation of relationships created ripples in family life as new partners were introduced and new blended families formed. Many families wrestled with the dynamics between children of different ages, including finding suitable activities that included all children.
- Many of the families also experienced additional pressures associated with their extended families, including caring responsibilities for parents, grandparents and other family members.
- Everyday life pressures, particularly lack of time, energy and money were noted as being barriers to playing together as a family for half the families interviewed.

¹ In order to carry out the interviews at 6-9 months and 12-18/24 months after the weekend, our sample was based upon those families attending weekends during 2008-10.

Working families faced pressures of balancing family life with work, especially low-paid and shift work.

- Behavioural problems and effective discipline were identified by families as major battles. Exhaustion of parents could create a negative spiral with children misbehaving to get parents' attention.
- Health problems for both adults and children were a concern for many of the families we interviewed, including children diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders and related disorders such as ADHD, which affected their schooling. Parents and carers also suffered from ill health ranging from less serious illnesses, but which nevertheless were of concern and impeded their capacity to cope and parent, to more serious illness such as Multiple Sclerosis, cancer and heart disease.
- Parents felt they had positive relationships with schools. Around half of the families felt children were doing well in school. However, around half said their children had experienced behavioural issues at school including attendance difficulties or problems around bullying, and almost half of the families had children that were receiving additional support in some form at school.
- Many of the families who attended Playing 2 Learn weekends at Trafford Hall felt isolated and excluded from their own communities and from social networks more widely.
- Families attending P2L events had a good understanding of what play is, and why it was important in theory, but sometimes felt they needed specific ideas and inspiration for things to do, and that they struggled to actually engage in play in practice. A number of families were reluctant to do 'messy play' or outdoors activities. Many wanted inspiration and ideas for specific activities, and affordable activities suitable for a wide range of ages.

Outcome evaluation findings: outcomes of the P2L programme

We assessed outcomes under four key headings: family interaction; parents' and carers' attitudes towards and input into children's opportunities for play; younger children's ability to learn; parents' and carers' participation in the community, self-esteem and confidence.

Short-Term Outcomes

Throughout the programme a total of 127 (out of the 205 families that attended weekends) returned three month evaluation forms to Trafford Hall via support organisations (62%).

Family interaction

A majority of families said they had started to do specific activities since the weekend at Trafford Hall, for example, in answer to the question: 'Since the weekend, have you started to do any of the following':

- 107 families said they had read with their child/children;
- 104 had started to play counting games;
- 74 said they now set up regular opportunities for messy play.

Parents' and carers' input into children's opportunities for play

97 families had started to plan physical activities with their child/children on a regular basis. In answer to the question: 'Since the weekend, have you started to do any of the following', 106 families said that they had children's books in the house.

Families were also asked what things they felt were most important in relation to their child/children's learning:

- large numbers of parents identified play (114 families);
- followed closely by family (107) and school (107);
- then home, reading, socialising and healthy eating (all identified by 90 families);
- exercise (88);
- finally writing (79) and number work (78).

Younger children's ability to learn

112 families reported on whether or not they had noticed any changes in their child/children's attitudes or behaviour since the weekend at Trafford Hall, of this number:

- 88 families reported that there had been some improvement with 46 families saying there had been a noticeable improvement and 42 families reporting a slight improvement.
- However, 20 families said that there had been no improvement in their child/children's behaviour and 4 families reported that behaviour had become worse.

Parents' and carers' participation in the community, self-esteem and confidence

Families reported in the evaluation on whether they had been involved in any community events as a family:

- 62 of the 116 families who answered the question said they had participated in community events as a family;
- a further 48 families said they had not yet but they intended to;
- just 6 families said they did not intend to do so.

In addition, 48 families had begun to volunteer at schools, nurseries and playgroups.

Medium-Term Outcomes

Some of the medium-term outcomes were more easily identifiable as a direct result of P2L than others, in particular, changes in family interaction and how parents contributed to their children's opportunities for play appeared to be most clearly attributed by families to the programme. Many families also saw clear links between the programme and advancing their own levels of confidence and self-esteem, although this did not always necessarily translate into greater participation in their community. However, more difficult to measure was the direct role of P2L on the children's ability to learn, given a wide range of other contributing factors. The following findings are based on in-depth research with a sample of 20 families.

Family interaction

There was evidence to suggest the Playing 2 Learn programme had a positive impact on the families and their family interaction, in relation to the many pressures experienced that inhibited family interaction:

- A majority of the families interviewed talked about the value of the programme being time out from their daily challenges, a break away from home and its related distractions and issues, and the chance to spend quality time as a family. The Playing 2 Learn weekends were recognised by many of the families to have been a valuable and enjoyable experience different to anything they had done before.
- Just over half the families also felt that their family interaction and relations between family members had improved since the weekend.
- Families specifically credited the P2L programme with providing them with ideas for improving family interaction. Many acknowledged the weekends as a re-discovery and reminder to parents and carers about the pleasure involved in spending quality time as a family, and their ability to interact positively together. Support organisations credited the weekend as an opportunity to experience quality time.
- Unfortunately, for a third of families their specific circumstances continued to limit interaction within their family.
- Money remained a barrier to families spending time together for a small minority of families following participation in P2L.
- The residential nature of the weekend and the environment in and around Trafford Hall also played a valuable role in the success of the programme, with children free to roam the grounds and parents relaxed, knowing they were safe. There were social networking opportunities, e.g. in the evenings, for many of the parents who had only limited contact with friends and support networks in their home communities.

Parents' and carers' input into children's opportunities for play

One of the key objectives of the P2L programme was to improve parents' knowledge and skills around learning through play. It was hoped that family members would develop skills, knowledge and understanding of how play can be both fun and educational, as well as ideas for play activities which would enhance children's ability to learn. Baseline data showed that families had a good understanding of what play was and why it was important, but found this hard to put into practice, including getting inspiration and ideas for specific activities, and finding affordable activities suitable for a wide range of ages. There were the following positive impacts of the programme upon parents input into their children's opportunities for play:

- Just under half of the families noted that they had started to spend more time together following the programme, with a third identifying that their ability to engage as a family had improved.
- More than half the families felt that they had gained new ideas for play, and that the programme had helped to improve their understanding of the importance of play for their children's development.

- A quarter mentioned that they were now aware of how playing together did not need to be expensive and could be achieved with a limited amount of money.
- Unfortunately for a small minority of families, they still struggled to find any time to play together as a family.
- Support organisation staff noted particularly that the weekends had enabled parents to increase their own input into their children's opportunities for play.
- Many families remembered specific activities from their weekend at Trafford Hall and recalled how the weekend had provided ideas for play as well as the confidence to make these play ideas a reality

Younger children's ability to learn

The P2L programme was also designed to help improve the ability of younger children to learn and for their families to play a role in this learning. This was a relatively difficult measure for this qualitative evaluation because of: the limited period of contact with families; lack of direct contact with schools; and limited baseline information. Families and children had experienced difficulties with education, for example where children had been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders and related disorders including ADHD. There were other specific health issues that had some impact on their children's ability to learn. More families mentioned their children experienced behavioural issues at school including attendance difficulties or problems around bullying, and just under half of the families had children that were receiving additional support in some form at school. However, just over half felt that their children were coping with school, and most parents and carers said they had positive relationships with schools and were confident to contact schools.

From our interviews with the families following their attendance on the P2L programme, the situation was little changed for the majority of the families. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest an increase in understanding among many families of their children's learning and how they themselves, as parents or carers, could assist in this learning. However, it is also worth noting that for many of the families wider changes were also underway linked to their children's schooling, including increased support and moving schools.

- Those families struggling with Autism, related disorders or other specific health problems continued to struggle with these issues.
- Similarly, many of the children receiving additional support in school continued to do so.
- However, a fifth of families felt their children's behaviour in school had improved, and the number of parents and carers who felt their children were coping ok at school increased slightly.
- Many families also acknowledged that the importance they attached to playing together as a family had also increased alongside their understanding of play and its role in their children's development.

Parents' and carers' participation in the community, and self-esteem and confidence of parents and carers

Improved self-esteem and confidence of parents and increased participation in the local community was a specified outcome of the P2L programme. A number of the families identified themselves as being isolated or lacking in confidence to some extent, thereby limiting their participation in the community, although around a third were active in their communities already. There were some changes to levels of participation in the community, and self-confidence:

- 5 families mentioned that they had noticed an improvement in their levels of community and social activity and how included in the community they felt.
- A further 6 families however noted little change and were continuing to experience difficulties.
- 6 families also pinpointed an improvement in their self-confidence within their own family unit and 3 families noted that they had increased their confidence in designing games and playing with their children.
- Just over half of the families felt that the weekend at Trafford Hall had served a valuable purpose in enabling them to meet other people and share experiences. For many of the parents and carers this social activity and experience sharing provided a much needed confidence boost.
- Support organisations said the P2L events had a fundamental impact on the confidence and self-esteem of lots of the families involved.
- Families placed significant value on the opportunity to speak to other families from different areas of the country about their experiences. Sharing problems and experiences of family life enabled many of the parents to gain confidence and to feel less alone in their situations.
- For many families on the courses making the decision to come away for the weekend was a major commitment that took many outside of their natural comfort zones. Many families mentioned that it was the first and only time they had spent time together as a family in this way, and for others it was the first time they had travelled independently away from their home area.

Longer-Term Outcomes

We re-interviewed five of the 20 families 12-24 months after the weekend with a sample of families of different family types, household compositions and geographical locations. Despite these differences the families re-interviewed shared many experiences and feelings about parenting as well as the P2L weekend itself. Families had experienced many critical life changes in a relatively short space of time, including dealing with family bereavements, serious ill health, changing employment status, moving home, gaining qualifications, reconciliation as well as separation from partners, and new children joining the family. The children specifically had experienced various changes including increasing or decreasing additional support at school and more generally, moving schools. The progress of the families re-interviewed was mixed. Some were coping well and had experienced positive developments including gaining confidence in their own abilities as parents and carers and within their local communities, in addition to children progressing well in school.

For others the experience was more mixed, with significant challenges emerging or with little change to their overall situation or in the behaviour of their children.

Family interaction

- For many families, their priorities for the future involved spending time together, and also going on a holiday as a family. Going away together was something that few had much experience of before, except for, in some cases, travelling to Trafford Hall.
- Four of the five families identified that the weekend had helped them in their family life and interaction in some way and made a difference to them.

Parents' and carers' input into children's opportunities for play

- All families remembered the P2L weekends; some had impressionistic memories whilst others had clear and distinct memories of specific activities and events.
- All of the families had also continued to use at least some of the specific activities they learned during the P2L weekend when back at home, though often with some adaptation. Even those with only impressions or vague memories could name specific activities they had continued to do.
- All families felt that playing together as a family was important although had different ideas on why and how this was the case.

Younger children's ability to learn

- The children specifically had experienced various changes including increasing or decreasing additional support at school and more generally, moving schools. For some families, children were progressing well in school. For others the experience was more mixed, with significant challenges emerging or with little change in the behaviour of children.

Parents' and carers' participation in the community, and self-esteem and confidence of parents and carers

- For many, one of the most important features of the weekend was the support gained from spending time and sharing experiences with other families as well as with the P2L trainers who were able to engage and involve the children in activities.
- All families re-emphasised in the follow-up interviews the vital role that the support organisations continue to play in their daily family lives. For many, the support organisation was considered the very first point of contact when experiencing difficulties, in advance of family and friends in some cases.
- All families had aspirations and plans for the future. For some families this was associated with the parents' and carers' ambitions in terms of education, qualifications or employment.

Process evaluation findings

- Trafford Hall made efforts to attract families from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and geographical locations to ensure each weekend had a broad cultural mix, and achieved this broad mix.
- The courses allowed for flexibility and adaptation so that the trainers could adjust the activities as necessary for the particular group of families on the course. There was a structure in place but room to make changes as and when appropriate. This was effective in nearly all cases, with a few minor exceptions.
- Families generally had very positive reports of the weekends spent at Trafford Hall, mentioning: the friendliness and support of the staff team; the fun and easy to do activities; not having to cook or clean.
- Playing 2 Learn worked well in collaboration and coordination with the support organisations and helped to reinforce the work of these organisations. Many support workers that we spoke to felt that Playing 2 Learn helped strengthen the work that support organisations were themselves doing with the families over the longer term.
- Support organisations played a key role both in the practical delivery of the programme through referring families, organising and assisting with the planning of the weekend away alongside the families and completing evaluation work. In addition to this, support organisations were trusted by the families and work with the families over long periods of time, in many cases providing valued support and help.
- Both trust and communication needed to be sensitively managed on the P2L programme. Overall, support organisations felt this had happened. There were complex sets of relationships and lines of confidentiality between the families, the support organisations, and Trafford Hall which were well-managed. Strong links between Trafford Hall and the support organisations resulted in amendments to administration processes for the programme to allow better flows of information, and to enable the P2L team at Trafford Hall to better understand and prepare for needs of specific families.
- In order to recruit families, assist them to attend the weekends, and thoroughly evaluate the Programme, demands were placed upon the support organisations, as the main point of contact for the families. Some representatives from support organisations felt that the administrative burden upon them was quite large.

The cost of the Programme, for example where they subsidised travel costs, was also identified by support organisation representatives as something that may become more difficult to manage as funding streams become tighter as a result of the current economic climate. Around 25% of the total families attending over the three year programme received a travel bursary from the charity (NCRC) to attend Trafford Hall.
- It was important that families were provided with adequate information about the weekend and its content to feel fully prepared and to ensure that unreasonable expectations were not built up by the support organisations in a bid to encourage families to participate. It was also important that the families were not 'sold' the weekend as a 'holiday'.

Conclusions

Playing 2 Learn could present a challenge for vulnerable families to travel away from home, meet new families in an unknown environment, and expose themselves to new experiences. The evaluation suggests that some of the most distressed families were able to meet this challenge, and benefited from it. The value of the residential setting was to help families to try new things – venture into an unknown and unfamiliar environment, get mucky with their children in messy play, meet people from new cultures, and simply have time to talk to other parents who were accepting of them and their family. For families who tended not to go away together, the P2L weekends were a rare, high value ‘treat’ and break, as well as a learning experience.

It would seem that the value of P2L was also in the hands-on approach. Through families being able to see and do the play activities, the ideas stayed with people up to two years after the weekends when the follow-up evaluation took place. Many of the families on the programme were going through tough times that play alone could not resolve. However, the benefits of playing together and spending time as a family were strongly felt by participants, despite many other pressures.

The Programme aimed to be a: “*snapshot removed from the everyday*” – an opportunity for families to relate and interact differently, as something to draw on for inspiration when they return to their often challenging daily lives. It seems that the snapshot of fun but constructive learning on the weekends stayed in families’ minds, and helped them work and pull together when back at home.

1. Introduction to the Playing 2 Learn programme

This report presents results from research over three years of the Playing 2 Learn (P2L) programme at Trafford Hall, home of the National Communities Resource Centre (NCRC). The research was commissioned by NCRC and conducted by LSE Housing and Communities, funded by the Big Lottery. Short-term self-reported outcomes were collected by Trafford Hall using a survey, with 127 families responding (62%). We present the medium- and longer-term outcomes for a sample of 20 families who participated in the Playing 2 Learn programme between 2008 and 2010², although the programme itself continued until 2011. The four key outcomes we examined for the 20 families were:

- Family interaction
- Parents’/carers’ attitudes towards and input into children’s opportunities for play
- Younger children’s ability to learn
- Parents’/carers’ participation in the community and self-esteem/confidence of parents and carers

²

In order to carry out the interviews at 6-9 months and 12-18/24 months after the weekend, our sample was based upon those families attending weekends during 2008-10.

LSE Housing and Communities also undertook a light-touch process evaluation of the way the programme had been delivered (also known as a formative evaluation).

What was the Playing 2 Learn programme?

Playing 2 Learn was a Big Lottery funded Family Learning Programme using creative and practical activities to help parents and other adults improve children's learning ability. The programme was open to families from low-income communities across England. Based on the idea that 'families are the first teachers', the programme promoted learning together as fun and enabled families to spend quality time together away from their home environments engaging in a range of cheap and accessible activities.

Playing 2 Learn at the National Communities Resource Centre (Trafford Hall)

The Playing 2 Learn programme was created and developed by Trafford Hall and the programme was organised, managed and delivered by the Centre. Trafford Hall is a registered charity which offers training and support to all those living and working in low-income areas throughout the UK to develop their skills, confidence and capacity to tackle problems and reverse poor conditions. Help for families from socially excluded areas is an issue which has been tackled at Trafford Hall for some years and the organisation believes that involvement of residents from low income areas in the development of their programmes is a crucial element of their work.

The concept of the Playing 2 Learn programme originally arose out of the concern of a primary-school teacher (linked with Trafford Hall) that many disadvantaged seven-year-olds had poor concentration, poor hand-eye co-ordination and often extremely poor confidence and social skills. She felt that, given a school situation where classes of over 30 are often the norm, the ability of parents to encourage and develop their children's learning was crucial, but that so often disadvantaged families struggled to provide toys, books and educational games. Her core idea was that parents and carers needed support to be educated in how to stimulate children without incurring a high cost.

How did families get involved in the programme?

Families from low income communities across the UK were contacted via support organisations such as community organisations and statutory services, including family centres, social services teams, schools and parenting organisations, tenants' and residents' groups, church groups, and support groups. Families were then nominated or invited to the Playing 2 Learn programme by these local support organisations. The support organisations played a vital role in the organising of the programme by acting as the point of contact between families and Trafford Hall. Trafford Hall made extra efforts to attract families from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and geographical locations to ensure each weekend had a broad cultural mix and the Trafford Hall team worked hard to extend their database and contacts to ensure that this was achieved.

Over the period (2008-2011) there were 26 residential weekend events with a total of 205 families attending - 795 individual family members participating. Of this number, 288 adults (parents and carers) attended with 507 children. The average number of participants on each programme was 31. Around a quarter of the families involved were from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) background. Families attended from all regions of England; the majority (54%) were from outside the North West.

Each Playing 2 Learn weekend had a main theme including:

- The environment
- Carnival
- Story sacks
- Puppetry
- It's cheap to play
- Game-making

The weekends all involved activities which were designed to be fun and interactive (both outdoors and indoors). For each weekend, the activities were structured around the particular theme; for example during the Environment weekend, families used materials from the surrounding environment to take part in creative activities. For the Story Sack weekend, families brought to life a book of their choice by using basic art, craft, teamwork and communication skills.

Brief description of types of activities

Weekend activities were designed to help families in their abilities in the following skills and motivations:

- Communication
- Numeracy
- Literacy
- Working together
- Social interaction
- Awareness of surrounding environment
- Hand to eye coordination
- Developing self-confidence
- Physical activity
- Motor skills

The activities were designed to be centred on everyday items and activities. The programme did this because the charity felt it would make it more likely that families would be engaged and that parents and families would be encouraged to try to recreate the activities at home once the weekend was over and families were back in their normal lives. One of Trafford Hall's aims in delivering the programme like this was to demonstrate to families how straightforward and how cheap it can be to play at home with many parents on the weekends feeling that a lack of time and money were barriers to them being able to play together as a family. Whilst some of the activities

may not be directly replicable in home environments, the idea was that they could be adapted and used as a base for other games and activities.

The aim of all the courses is to ensure that the parents can take ideas and opportunities home with them. It will also increase the parents' awareness of the importance of play in learning. Cheap and memorable games ensure they can take the experience and reuse it in the home environment. (Playing 2 Learn Trainer)

The courses allowed for flexibility and adaptation so that the trainers could adjust the activities as necessary for the particular group of families on the course. There was a structure in place but room to make changes as and when appropriate.

Trafford Hall used informal review sessions during the weekend to test and explore whether the families understood the objectives of the weekend, and were aimed to be a way of communicating to families the need to assign time and effort to these issues during the weekend and longer term once back in home environment. Enjoyment and fun remained key to all activities since the idea was to use play in order to learn.

Playing 2 Learn was a residential programme where families stayed overnight at Trafford Hall, a grade II listed Georgian building set in 14 acres of landscaped grounds. The residential element of the programme was seen by Trafford Hall as valuable as it allowed for informal social time for the families in addition to the more structured activities as well as enabling families to have time away from the everyday pressures and challenges of life.

2. The research

Aims

LSE Housing and Communities was commissioned to evaluate the Playing 2 Learn programme between 2008 and 2011 to find out if it helps families, how it helps, and what, if any, gaps existed between the aims of the programme and its outcomes. The evaluation used self-reported outcomes data from the whole programme to examine short-term outcomes. Our primary research focused on four medium- and longer-term outcomes of the programme for a sample of participating families. We have anonymised the names of the families, and also changed any personal details that could have identified the families.

The key outcomes assessed were:

- **Family interaction** including amount and quality of time spent together (particularly doing activities and play), and family cohesion/relationships.
- **Parents' and carers' (and older siblings') input into children's opportunities for play**, and family attitudes to children's learning, knowledge and understanding of the role of play in children's education.

- **Younger children’s ability to learn/learning skills** e.g. communication, social skills, concentration and attention span, general development, behaviour in school or playgroup, reading ability.
- **Parents’ and carers’ participation in the community, self-esteem and confidence of parents and carers.**

We undertook a light-touch process (formative) evaluation which assessed:

- overall, how the programme was implemented
- participant satisfaction with the events
- the quality of the delivery of the weekend events
- relationships between Trafford Hall and the participants and referral agencies.

Methods

Outcome evaluation

In order to find out what impact the Playing 2 Learn weekends had on the families involved, the evaluation team used a variety of sources of information including:

- Information about the circumstances of the sample of 20 families before participating in the programme and at the very start of the programme (known as the baseline information), from:
 - brief personal details about family circumstances provided by support organisations when they apply for families to participate in the programme;
 - baseline ‘family evaluation maps’ completed by all families at the start of the weekend – these family evaluation maps allowed families to share personal details about their families and about their experiences as the weekend progresses as well as adding value to the programme. Review sessions often included informal sharing of ideas as well as completing the paper documents. The maps were packed away after each review session and returned to the families as and when needed throughout the weekend;
 - informal interviews with some families during Playing 2 Learn weekends alongside observation of the programme;
 - feedback on family circumstances and experiences from Trafford Hall programme staff gathered through the course of the weekend.
- Information gathered from the 3 month evaluation forms completed by the support organisations and returned to Trafford Hall, which covered estimates of amount of family time spent playing, improvements in family interaction, and use of ideas from the events. This survey was conducted for all 205 families which attended the events, and 62% responded.
- Information about any changes that have happened in the lives of a sample of families attending P2L weekends after 6-9 months, based on semi-structured interviews in the home neighbourhood. We interviewed 20 families in total over the course of the programme. The families were selected to reflect a range of family and household types (including number of children, lone and two-parent headed households, ethnic background), degree of severity of issues faced, and geographical location.

- We also carried out follow-up interviews with 5 of the 20 families around 12-24 months after attending a P2L weekend. These 5 families comprised different household types, geographical location and complexity of needs.
- We carried out in-depth interviews with 9 workers within 8 support organisations. These interviews allowed us to find out from the support organisations how the programme affected their work and any impacts they were able to observe from the families involved.

Table 1 below shows the sample of 20 families we interviewed.

The methods used for the process evaluation were:

- feedback from participants
- interviews with family support organisations who referred families to the programme
- interviews with programme delivery staff at Trafford Hall
- programme out-turn data such as attendance figures
- observations of the events.

Table 1: Sample of Families³

	Name of main carer (s) ⁴	Area/Region	BME families	Household composition				Number of children
				Two parents	Single parent (mother)	Single parent (father)	Grand-parent(s)	
1	Cathy	North West			x			2
2	Natalie	North West			x			2
3	Peter and Sarah	North West		x				4
4	John	North West				x		2
5	Doreen	North West			x			2
6	Emily	South East			x			2
7	Jessica *	South East			x			1
8	Amala and Sanjay*	Yorkshire and the Humber	x	x				5
9	Ibrahim*	Yorkshire and the Humber	x			x		5
10	Ian and Kate	Yorkshire and the Humber		x				2
11	Julie	Yorkshire and the Humber			x			2
12	Jenny and Chris	Yorkshire and the Humber		x				2
13	Eva and George	Yorkshire and the Humber		x				2
14	Anna	Yorkshire and the Humber			x			2
15	Alice	Yorkshire and the Humber			x			4
16	Nicola	South East			x			3
17	Rosie and Tom*	North West					x	2
18	Karen	North West			x			5
19	Amanthi and Nuwan	London	x	x				3
20	Kusum and Jegan*	London	x	x				1

* Families were interviewed twice, once after 6-9 months, then again at least a year after they had attended P2L weekends at Trafford Hall

³ All names have been anonymised

Sample totals	Area/Region	BME families	Household composition					Number of children
			Two parents	Single parent (mother)	Single parent (father)	Grand-parent(s)	Other*	
Number of families within the 20 families sample	North West: 7 Yorkshire and the Humber: 8 London: 2 South East:3	4	7	10	2	1	-	1 child: 1 2 children: 12 3 children: 2 4 children: 2 5 children: 3
Percentage of our total sample – 20 families	North West: 35% Yorkshire and the Humber: 40% London: 10% South East: 15%	20%	35%	50%	10%	5%	-	1 child: 5% 2 children: 60% 3 children: 10% 4 children: 10% 5 children: 15%
P2L programme total (total number of families 196**)	North West: 94 Yorkshire and the Humber: 41 London: 20 South East: 13 Other: 37	46	58	105	12	6	15	1 child: 33 2 children: 75 3 children: 58 4 children: 20 5 children: 10
P2L programme total (average percentage**)	North West: 48% Yorkshire and the Humber: 21% London: 10% South East: 7%	24%	30%	54%	6%	4%	8%	1 child: 17% 2 children: 38% 3 children: 30% 4 children: 10% 5 children: 5%

Notes:

The number of children is the total children in the family household, not necessarily the children attending the weekend.

This table focuses on the demographic make-up of our 20 families sample. Therefore, percentages for the programme total may not add up to 100 as there will be representation from other areas in the area/region section, there is also an ‘other’ section used to measure household composition based on attendance at the weekend, i.e. parent attending the weekend with another relative, and in number of children there were some families attending P2L weekends who had more than 5 children.

* Other indicates parent have come with others, e.g. Grandparents, friends or relatives

** We had data available at the time of the evaluation for only 196 of the total 205 families who attended P2L weekends in the three years from 2008-2011. These figures and percentages reflect the total as 196 families.

3. Review of the literature

Here we provide a brief review of what the literature tells us about family learning and play.

Family learning

Parents are children's first and most enduring educators (Alexander, 1997, p9)

Family learning is generally used to describe learning that takes place in and around families and can include anything from parents playing with their children, meal time discussions, helping children with school work, understanding what children do in school, emotional support and dealing with difficult issues.

Government policy makers and practitioners have become increasingly aware of the importance of family learning and the home background as influencing factors in children's learning. The DCSF's Children's Plan from 2007 stressed the importance of involving parents in learning:

We want every young person to achieve their potential and enjoy their time in education. Parents' support for their child's learning is an essential foundation for achievement. (DCSF, 2007, p53)

Evidence suggests that family learning can help to overcome difficulties associated with a disadvantaged background for both parents and their children and that supporting parents as children's most enduring educators could have a huge impact on children's social and emotional development and educational attainment (Alexander, 1997, p49).

Support for families as the base of learning offers a powerful way of approaching a number of issues facing British society and help to address the repeating cycles of poor educational achievement and limited life chances within families across generations (Alexander, 1997, p15). This commitment to family learning has been maintained by successive governments for a number of years:

Family learning can play an effective part in furthering the Government's three key policy objectives for education: raising achievement, widening participation and countering social exclusion (OFSTED 1999, p23).

Parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation. In the primary age range the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools. The scale of the

impact is evident across all social classes and all ethnic groups (Desforges, 2003, p4).

Families are the bedrock of our society and the place for nurturing happy, capable and resilient children (DCSF, 2007, p6).

The Coalition Government from 2010 continued to support this idea that families play a vital role in children's development and ability to learn. The Labour MP Frank Field was appointed by the government in June 2010 to lead an independent review into poverty and life chances. The report, published in December 2010, highlights the key role that parenting plays in improving life chances.

There is a weight of evidence which shows that a combination of positive parenting, a good home learning environment and parents' qualifications can transform children's life chances, and are more important to outcomes than class background and parental income" (Field Review 2010, p37)

The Schools White Paper (Department for Education 2010) sets out how the Coalition Government will improve the outcomes and life chances of all children. Schools will be increasingly accountable to parents for the progress and achievement of pupils. The White Paper presents the Government's strategy for raising achievement levels, improving pupils' behaviour, and lowering the attainment gap. The Field Review on Poverty and Life Chances (Field 2010) identifies a central role for parents in meeting each of these goals, particularly in the early years. The White Paper and the Field Review reinforce the need to involve parents in education, and to create a good home learning environment. (Goodall, J., and Vorhaus, J, 2011, p3)

In *Confident Parents, Confident Children*, Pugh et al (1994) identified three vital aspects of family learning:

- Knowledge – i.e. parents knowing what needs to be done;
- Skills – how to do this; and
- Attitude/self-esteem – the confidence to know that they can do it.

The Playing 2 Learn programme aimed to address all of these issues by providing families with the knowledge and skills they need to play together, and by boosting confidence and self-esteem in both parents and children.

Play

Many parents are unsure about the best way to help their child to learn and it is in this area that play can help as one of the best ways of supporting a child's development is to have fun with them. (DfES, 2007, p3)

Play is generally understood to be what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests in their own way and for their own reasons. The vital importance that play has in the health and wellbeing of children has received wider support in recent years. The previous Labour Government launched a Fair Play Consultation in April 2008 which attracted a huge response, and a Play Strategy was developed in the same year. Play is not only a vital part of the way children enjoy their childhood, but was also central to the achievement of the previous government's Every Child Matters outcomes, later incorporated into the Children's Plan. These outcomes were for every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, to have the support they need to: be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution; achieve economic well-being.

From May 2010, the Coalition government's approach to children's services has involved a shift away from the specific terminology associated with the Every Child Matters outcomes and towards a more general and overarching aim of helping children achieve more.

Play remains central to children's enjoyment of their lives and to their physical and mental health development (Play England, 2009). Play helps develop learning skills, is central to achievement, and is essential for the development of skills that children and young people need to progress to adulthood and move into education and work. (DCSF, 2008, p1).

The best way to make children good is to make them happy. Oscar Wilde
(quoted in DfES, 2007, p4)

However, early in 2011 the government made clear to Play England (the national play organisation) that its long-standing contracts for research, information and good practice development, as well as the national Play Strategy contracts, would not be renewed after the end of March 2011 (Play England, 2011). Despite the government's commitments to making Britain the most family-friendly place in Europe and to increasing social mobility, many fear that the impact of funding cuts on children and young people's services, primarily affecting the most vulnerable families in the most deprived areas, will be severe.

4. Family contexts - surviving or thriving?

The Playing 2 Learn programme was open to families from low income communities across England. These families experienced a series of pressures that undermined their ability to play and learn together as families. In this section we look in detail at some of the most important factors.

Families mentioned various issues that impacted on their ability to engage and spend time with their children at home. The lack of time, energy and money seemed to be huge barriers to families spending more time together. While some families we met

were experiencing particular periods of distress and upset, the majority of families involved with Playing 2 Learn seemed to be coping with their everyday lives, yet the various demands upon the parents did not allow for quality time together with their children as a family. Issues identified by the families interviewed were around their family circumstances and included: relationship breakdown with difficulties encountered as new partners were introduced and as new families were formed; behavioural problems of children and issues of discipline; and the dynamics between children of different ages. Many of the families also experienced additional pressures from extended families, including caring responsibilities for parents, grandparents and other family members. Many families were experiencing health problems, and some felt socially isolated, although around a third were already actively involved in communities.

Family circumstances

Issues identified by the families interviewed were around their family circumstances and included relationship breakdown and formation, the difficulties encountered as new families were formed, behavioural problems of children and the dynamics between children. 12 out of 20 families mentioned these issues. Managing the different ages and requirements of their children was identified as a significant issue for around a third of the families interviewed (7/20). In addition, the parents' ability and confidence to engage with their children and the complications of family relationships were difficult for over half the families interviewed (11/20).

Families experienced many critical life changes in a relatively short space of time, including dealing with family bereavements, serious ill health, changing employment status, moving home, gaining qualifications, reconciliation as well as separation from partners, and new children joining the family.

Time and work

Everyday life pressures were noted as being barriers to playing together as a family for half the families. Day to day pressures including the lack of time families were able to spend together and the challenges of balancing family and work life. Slightly more than half of the families (11/20) identified the pressures of time and/or work as a significant barrier to spending time together as a family. A number of families felt that they lacked time together as a family, particularly quality time, due to the pressures of trying to balance family life with work (especially unreliable, low paid work and unsociable shift patterns) and balancing the needs of children to ensure they receive individual attention.

There is no time being together as a family, because my husband is working nights. 5 o'clock he is leaving, by the time the children come and finish the school at 3.30pm and we reach home at 4 o'clock. So only one hour together, only having meal in that time. So we don't spend much time together as a family. We don't have time. The routine does not allow it but we want to have time. (Amanthi)

Spreading my time between them individually, for all of them, they don't get any individual time apart from Rebecca when Christine is at nursery

she gets me all day to herself but she's the only one that does, the others don't get any proper one to one, perhaps 10 minutes here or there before stories at bedtime but other than that we don't really get that because there's only one of me. (Alice)

We make more effort to spend more time together. I have even had a word with my boss to see if I can change my hours at work because I work half one 'til eight so Ben has started reading now and George [husband] doesn't read so well so like Ben hasn't got anyone to help because I can't do it when I get in as the kids have been in bed nearly 2 hours. So I have tried to change my hours now to coincide with school, going to work earlier and finishing earlier. It's looking pretty promising, even if I could finish at 6pm. (Eva)

Ideas for affordable play activities and local facilities

Financial limitations, alongside the lack of local facilities and activities in the families' neighbourhoods and communities, featured as key barriers to family interaction and to families' opportunities to play together. Just under half (8/20) of the families mentioned physical barriers including a lack of space at home and limited facilities/activities in their local area. Families wanted affordable activities suitable for a wide range of ages.

We need more things that are free for the kids to do, somewhere safe...there's going to be loads of new things here but you're going to have to pay for them. We have free swimming there at the moment. (Anna)

The only thing that gets in the way is money, which is the same for everybody. Most people who are on benefits can't afford days out really because it's getting too expensive. (Ian)

Not everything has to cost a massive amount of money, as we found out that weekend. Walking down to the park for a couple of hours, that doesn't cost any money, it's free, it's right there. You can go and play in the playground and go for a walk, there are loads of places you can explore. (Natalie)

Other barriers included problems of travel and transportation, weather, finding suitable activities for all age groups and for children with special requirements, and the lack of local support networks.

Many families were unsure of how they could play with their children and felt they lacked the resources, time and confidence to be able to do this. Families on the weekends were asked to identify what play means to them, some examples are listed below:

- Fun
- Happiness

- Expressing ourselves
- Quality time
- Getting together as a family
- Sharing/bonding
- Dancing
- Singing
- Making mess
- Imagination
- Painting and drawing
- Rough play
- Gentle play

This list suggests that families across the Programme generally had a good understanding of play that was in line with both official definitions and with the Playing 2 Learn programme definition. However, families also identified that they sometimes felt they needed specific ideas and inspiration for things to do, and that they struggled to actually engage in play in practice because of a lack of resources and time. Another aspect limiting the ability of some families to play was the reluctance to do ‘messy play’ or outdoor activities.

Discipline and behaviour

From our own observation during the weekends and from information and feedback provided by both support organisations and the Playing 2 Learn team, it appeared that some of the parents were extremely exhausted and therefore not always able to give as much attention and time to their children as needed. An interaction was then created with children often reacting by misbehaving in an attempt to get the attention they need, which would be negative, and both parents and children would be exhausted and stressed. We observed this pattern during the weekends at Trafford Hall. Parents often mentioned that discipline and behaviour represented the hardest thing about parenting:

I'm really no good at discipline. I do shout at Melissa but I don't smack them or anything. But discipline, like I say, you can tell Melissa 15 times and she still won't listen to me and in the end I give up. So discipline I'm not very good at but the fun stuff, I'm probably more confident there. (Natalie)

The most hardest thing about being a parent is sometimes difficulty managing their bad behaviour. Wanting to get through to them, trying to explain to them why this is wrong and that is wrong and trying to show them a better example of what they should be doing and helping them...doing things together and explaining as we're going and stuff. (Cathy)

I am not good with boundaries. That has slipped a lot since their dad left and I think that is why I am overcompensating for being on my own, then it slipped and it was anything for a bit of peace and quiet. That's

why I have got to try and pull things into order again; I am not very good with boundaries. (Nicola)

Parents also specifically indicated that they also lacked confidence within the family, particularly with reference to setting boundaries for children and discipline (4/20).

Health

Health problems for both adults and children were a concern for many of the families we interviewed. A minority of families (3/20) had experienced difficulties with their children at school and the children had been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders and related disorders including ADHD, although baseline data across the programme as a whole shows these issues were very prevalent.

My youngest son now has been diagnosed with ADHD, that took a long time of us being persistent about it, to be continuously on at the system about it, I just thought he was naughty and I was doing something wrong... (Emily)

A further 2 families also mentioned specific health issues that had some impact on their children's ability to learn and led to them missing out on schooling. Parents and carers also suffered from ill health ranging from less serious illnesses, but which nevertheless were of concern and impeded their capacity to cope and parent, to more serious illness such as Multiple Sclerosis, cancer and heart disease.

School and education

During our interviews with families we discussed with parents how well they felt they understood the school system and how well prepared they felt to support their children's learning within school. Many parents suggested that they felt confident in contacting the school:

I've got a really good relationship with the headmaster; we talk quite regularly about how the boys are doing. 3 maybe 4 times a week I'll ask how the boys have been during school and if there were any problems then the teacher would tell me. (Cathy)

Melissa never tells me anything but I do know that if I want to find out I can call them (school) up and ask them things. They are quite good like that. I will phone them up if there's anything going on. (Natalie)

Yeah, I would do that anyway, any problems I would go to the top, with working for the Citizens Advice Bureau and that I know how to deal with people. The kids are good kids, clever kids but sometimes it is hard, and I want to blow up... (Peter)

Additionally, there were many more (11/20) families who mentioned their children experienced behavioural issues at school including attendance difficulties or problems around bullying. Almost half of the families (9/20) had children that were receiving additional support in some form at school.

Ben has social problems at school, there's nothing wrong with him academically, they are looking at him, he's being referred to a paediatrician they are looking at Asperger's, maybe to coincide with ADHD as well. His academic level is where it should be so they are not unduly worried at school but he does disrupt the class so what I am saying to the special needs coordinator at school I don't want him to be labelled as a naughty child if we have got the problems. I want him to get the help that he should get. (Eva)

He's a bit behind, well quite a lot behind, in his reading and his literature side. That's why he has a SENCO for this. I think he has got a bit of a problem, but missing school hasn't helped. I am now worried about when he goes to secondary school, which is huge compared with where he is now. (Nicola)

Yeah, he's really at his level for reading but his maths and English are quite behind because obviously he has had time off and when he isn't concentrating. His problem is he will sit down and listen, and if he loses his concentration, he doesn't listen anymore and so he will mess around with the kid next to him, or do something else, and then he's not listening to what he is meant to be doing so when he has to do it, he doesn't know what he is meant to be doing. So instead of saying I don't understand he just says I can't do it but that's his way of telling you he doesn't understand, you have to explain. With Charlie you have to sit there and explain to him, as a whole class he doesn't listen. But if you go over to him and explain it to him, he'll listen because you are interacting with him and not everyone else. (Jessica)

However, despite these reported problems, slightly more than half of the families (11/20) believed that their children were coping with school or 'doing ok'.

Community and social networks

10 of the 20 families felt isolated and excluded from their own communities and often from social networks more widely. Four families also talked about their particular circumstances influencing their ability and willingness to be active in the community, as well as their own confidence. Four families felt their local area/community was lacking in facilities or opportunities to enable them to be more active. Parents and carers said that where their children had behavioural issues, it also undermined their confidence to participate in community activities, for example fears that children would behave inappropriately in public.

Around a third of the families (7/20) felt that they were pretty active in their community and felt involved. One of the objectives of the programme was to help parents, carers and children to participate more in their communities. We asked people if they felt they were active in their community:

With regards to groups, I don't attend very many at all...I'm always popping in and out of here [support organisation], maybe every 3 weeks or every month to see what's going on. (Cathy)

There is nobody, there is no-one to talk about...You know they are all different they have their own lives. You know. So I can't bother them. We have to look after ourselves...We come here without our parents or relatives, it's quite isolating. It's lonely and nowhere to go, no-one to talk to. (Amanthi)

5. Outcomes of the programme

Here, we present the short-, medium- and longer-term outcomes of the programme, structured under four key outcome headings:

- **Family interaction including amount and quality of time spent together (particularly doing activities and play), and family cohesion/relationships.**
- **Parents'/carers' (and older siblings') input into children's opportunities for play, and family attitudes to children's learning, knowledge and understanding of the role of play in children's' education.**
- **Younger children's ability to learn/learning skills e.g. communication, social skills, concentration and attention span, general development, behaviour in school or playgroup, reading ability.**
- **Parents'/carers' participation in the community, self-esteem and confidence.**

Short-Term Outcomes after Three Months

Throughout the programme a total of 127 (out of the 205 families that attended weekends) returned three month evaluation forms to Trafford Hall via support organisations (62%).

Family interaction

A majority of families said they had started to do specific activities since the weekend at Trafford Hall, for example, in answer to the question 'Since the weekend, have you started to do any of the following':

- 107 families said they had read with their child/children;
- 104 had started to play counting games;
- 74 said they now set up regular opportunities for messy play.

Parents' and carers' attitudes towards and input into children's opportunities for play
97 families had started to plan physical activities with their child/children on a regular basis. In answer to the question 'Since the weekend, have you started to do any of the following', 106 said they had children's books in the house.

Families were also asked what things they felt were most important in relation to their child/children's learning:

- **large numbers of parents identified play (114 families);**
- **followed closely by family (107) and school (107);**
- **then home, reading, socialising and healthy eating (all identified by 90 families);**
- **exercise (88);**
- **finally writing (79) and number work (78).**

Younger children's ability to learn

112 families reported on whether or not they had noticed any changes in their child/children's attitude or behaviour since the weekend at Trafford Hall, of this number:

- 88 families reported that there had been some improvement with 46 families saying there had been a noticeable improvement and 42 families reporting a slight improvement.
- However, 20 families said that there had been no improvement in their child/children's behaviour and 4 families reported that behaviour had become worse.

Parents' and carers' participation in the community, self-esteem and confidence

Families reported in the evaluation on whether they had been involved in any community events as a family:

- 62 of the 116 families who answered the question said they had participated in community events as a family;
- a further 48 families said they had not yet but they intended to;
- just 6 families said they did not intend to do so.

In addition, 48 families had begun to volunteer to help at school, nursery or a playgroup.

Medium-Term Outcomes after Six to Nine Months

Medium-Term Outcome 1: Family Interaction

Improved family interaction was an integral objective to the Playing 2 Learn programme as interaction encourages family members to take part in simple, practical educational activities that provide opportunities to play, learn and work together as a family.

In Section Four we described how families were experiencing many pressures that inhibited family interaction: day to day pressures including the lack of time families were able to spend together; challenges of balancing family and work life; relationship breakdown and formation with difficulties encountered as new families were formed; behavioural problems of children; and the dynamics between children of different ages and requirements.

While many of these issues require long-term and consistent attention, there was evidence to suggest the Playing 2 Learn programme had a positive impact on the families and their family interaction:

- More than half of the families interviewed (12/20) talked about the value of the weekend being a break away from home and the chance to spend quality time as a family with no distractions. This helped families to experience time together without some of the immediate pressures identified by families as inhibiting interaction.
- Around half of the families (11/20) also felt that their family interaction/relations between family members had improved since the weekend.
- A small number of families (2/20) credited the P2L programme with providing them with ideas for improving family interaction.
- Unfortunately, for a third of families (7/20), their specific circumstances continued to limit interaction within their family.
- Money remained a barrier to families spending time together for a small minority of families following participation in P2L.

The Playing 2 Learn weekend was recognised by many of the families to have been a valuable and enjoyable experience different to anything they had done before. For many of the families involved it was an opportunity to take some time out of their daily challenges and to have a break away from home and its related distractions and issues.

*Without having the pressures, to be able to do other stuff, they give us the chance, it was organised well. Stress-free, you know what I mean, I'm always stressed out here...**The main thing is that they put you at your ease. Its stuff that you wouldn't normally do because of the pressures you've got. Just to be able to do stuff with the kids, it's great and there wasn't anything difficult about it.** (John)*

I suppose just really a bit of time where I didn't have to do the washing and the ironing. No cooking and no cleaning, just literally time for the family, that whole weekend we was just together doing things. Whereas normally I'm doing this or that, and Tim is doing something, and then we're with the kids, then dinner's got to be cooked. There, we just went down to the restaurant, picked your dinner and then left, no washing up, I was like this is quite nice. (Jessica)

*There was no telephone, and you know what's it like, you arrange to do something with the kids and then someone rings up and you've got to do something and its more urgent than taking the kids out so you have to let them down. **But the emphasis there was on you and the kids spending the time together really...I think it shows you how much you rely on other things like television.** Because usually I'll say you watch this while I make tea, do you know what I mean? There was no TV there. In that respect it was good. (Eva)*

Playing 2 Learn trainers and the parents and carers were able to sit together and chat and share thoughts once children were in bed in a safe, comfortable and welcoming environment. This provided an important social networking opportunity for many of the parents who had only limited contact with friends and support networks in their home communities.

The residential nature of the weekend and the environment in and around Trafford Hall also played a valuable role in the success of the programme. Families stayed together in the Stable block which is a self-contained building separate from the Main Hall, though all came together to eat in the Hall itself. Parents relaxed knowing that their children were free to explore the grounds around Trafford Hall in safety (although parents always remained responsible for their children) and put their children to bed whilst they enjoyed a drink and a chat in the social space in the stable block immediately below the bedrooms. During the weekends that the evaluation team attended and observed the Programme, this happened and played a key role in building relationships during the weekends.

Linked to the above idea of the Playing 2 Learn weekend offering a break away from home and its distractions, many families also specified the weekend had provided the chance to spend quality time as a family, something they were not normally able to do. There was also mixing with children from other cultures which was not usual for some families.

We have never had a family weekend away like that and it was nice, there was no moaning, I turned my phone off for the whole weekend. It really was nice. Reality hits you when you get back home doesn't it.
(Jenny)

The kids enjoyed it because it was bonding with other children from different areas all over the country. I said to them all one day, get the names and addresses, we all did it then cos I'd done it. Took a little bit to open up for everyone. There was [one family], he was very quiet, he didn't know how, his daughter had always been in her bedroom, he had never seen her much as she'd been with her mum and he'd been at work. Just talking to him he opened up because he's never experienced anything like it. He was happy, because she'd never experienced bonding with other kids. He was smiling to see what his daughter was doing. It was nice. (Peter)

*It was a nice experience, I wish we could have stayed the same forever... **Being as a family and with other families. It's not what we generally always do...a new thing for us.*** (Amanthi)

*I think that for many of them, **because of multiple kind of issues that they can face, maybe don't, although they are with their kids, it can be quite difficult sometimes to find the time just to have time together to spend with them, and to focus on just playing and that kind of thing.** So I thought that it would be a really nice opportunity, first of all to get families out of London because a lot of the families don't have the*

financial means, or the knowledge of the area geographically to get out, or the confidence, so I thought it would give them that chance to get away and have a bit of headspace but also real quality time with the kids. (Support organisation worker, London)

Going to Trafford Hall did make a hell of a difference and did make me realize what my children was missing out on through not interacting with them. That was my main thing. I never interacted with them. I was the parent and just let them get on with what they wanted, it doesn't work like that so we do do a lot of things now. (Emily)

Because sometimes the parents are so busy they don't have time to listen to their children when they are shouting at them, after going to Trafford Hall a lot of them have realised how important that is. I have had a lot of feedback in writing saying they have learnt how important playing with their child is and how much of an impact it can have on their life. So I have had feedback like that which I think is fantastic. I think a lot of it has been building the relationships up, because it's the only time they have ever got away, it's away from everyday life, its somewhere different, you don't have the same stresses as every day and they have probably bonded a lot more. They were saying, one of the parents, that before they went away they didn't have much communication as a family and they've come back and they sit and spend a lot of time together. She makes a lot of effort now. I was really pleased with that. So that's a long term effect that has happened. (Support organisation worker, Yorkshire and the Humber)

Outcome 1: Family Interaction

Before

Issue breakdown (before)	Families	Total
Family circumstances - issues such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • relationship breakdown, • newly formed families, • behavioural problems of children, • dynamics between children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cathy • Natalie • Peter • Emily • Jessica • Amala • Julie • Jenny • Anna • Nicola • Rosie • Karen 	12
Time and work pressures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cathy • Natalie • John • Doreen • Jessica • Ibrahim • Eva • Alice • Amanthi • Ian • Rosie 	11
Age gap between children – difficulties balancing demands of children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natalie • Doreen • Julie • Jenny • Anna • Alice • Nicola 	7
Money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter • Ian • Kusum & Jegan 	3
Lack of ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John • Rosie • Doreen • Ibrahim 	4

Example quotes

There is no time being together as a family, because my husband is working nights. 5 o'clock he is leaving, by the time the children come and finish the school at 3.30pm and we reach home at 4 o'clock. So only one hour together, only having meal in that time. So we don't spend much time together as a family. We don't have time. The routine does not allow it but we want to have time. (Amanthi and Nuwan)

I didn't interact very well with my children, I didn't do anything with them. I basically took them to school, I worked, I picked them up, done the housework, they were in bed, it wasn't as if we could sit down together or anything, I never took them out socially or anything like that. (Emily)

After

Positive outcomes	Families	Total	
Experience of quality family time without time and work pressures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cathy • Natalie • Peter • Doreen • Jessica • Amala 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ibrahim • Eva • Ian • Julie • Jenny • Karen 	12
Family circumstances - improved relations/greater interaction/bonding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John • Doreen • Emily • Jessica • Amala • Ibrahim 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Julie • Jenny • Eva • Anna • Karen 	11
New positive ideas and strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John • Emily 		2
Ongoing issues (after)	Families	Total	
Family circumstances – no change in circumstances, or a deterioration in interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amanthi • Amala • Ian • Jenny 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anna • Alice • Nicola 	7
Money remained a barrier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter • Kusum & Jegan 		2

Example quotes

The weekend away done us the world of good, some time together bonding with the kids. (Peter)

I think, after we went to Trafford Hall we do spend more time together now as a family. Some things aren't as important as you thought they were, like going to work early every day. As long as the bills are paid you don't have to work every hour God sends. (Eva)

One thing I have noticed, the time that we do spend together is more productive...I'm able to explain things a lot better to the them so its clearer and easier for them to understand. (Cathy)

When I am at home with the kids I don't lose my temper much, I try to stay calm and talk to them and they do open up. Gosh we did loads of things that weekend. Playing outside with frisbee, things we used to do but in a different way. (Amala)

It properly opened my eyes to how important it is to spend time together. It taught me something. It explained the reasons and gives you strategies to do. (Ibrahim)

I don't know if it pulls you together. Because I was under such stress before and I do admit I let things go as a parent, not whacking them or anything, they weren't filthy or not fed, it was just not spending enough time with them as a parent... We have now got back what we lost and now play, talk and listen to each other a lot more. (Julie)

The relationship between my child and me is a lot better. Things are better at home. (Jenny)

Yeah I think it helped, because the kids loved it so much I think it brought them a bit closer together as well, when we were doing the bug hunt and things they were helping each other out and saying oh look come over and see this, they had both of our attention for the whole time. They benefitted from it I think because they had all of our attention plus there were other kids there and they were interacting with the other kids, running and playing and they loved it. (Jessica)

I think it's quite the same, just obviously the kids got a bit more connected together through going through that, because they had to work together so it probably helped in that way. They realised when they work together they get things done and they enjoy it a bit more. (Jessica)

I think that was because they had quality time with me that they enjoyed it so much. You know. I do think it's really benefited all of us because it was like an insight that we can have a laugh together and do stuff together without me always telling them off and them being naughty. It's possible to have the good stuff as well. (Karen)

We attended because we have our two grandchildren with us. We felt out of touch and needed some ideas and support. (Rosie)

When I am working, he looks after [her], when he is working I look after our daughter. That's why [we work] part-time. Not enough money but we are happy always. (Kusum and Jegan)

Medium-Term Outcome 2: Parents' and Carers' Input into Children's Opportunities For Play

One of the key objectives of the P2L programme was to improve parents' knowledge and skills around learning through play. It was hoped that family members would develop skills, knowledge and understanding of how play can be both fun and educational, as well as ideas for play activities which enhance children's ability to learn.

There were consistent themes mentioned by families as being integral to their ability to play together with their children, as detailed in Section Four: everyday life pressures, particularly time, work and money; parents' and carers' ability and confidence to engage with their children and the complications of family relationships including the age gaps between children; lack of space at home and limited facilities and activities in their local area. Baseline data showed that families had a good understanding of what play was and why it was important, but found this hard to put into practice, including getting inspiration and ideas for specific activities, and finding affordable activities suitable for a wide range of ages.

From the interviews carried out with the sample of 20 families there were the following positive impacts of the programme upon parents' input into their children's opportunities for play.

- 8 of the 20 families noted that they had started to spend more time together following the programme. With 7 families identifying that their ability to engage as a family had improved.
- More than half the families (12/20) felt that they had gained new ideas for play.
- 11 families also mentioned that the programme had helped to improve their understanding of the importance of play for their children's development.
- 5 families mentioned that they were now aware of how playing together didn't need to be expensive and could be achieved with a limited amount of money.
- Unfortunately for a small minority of families, they still struggled to find any time to play together as a family (2/20)

Support organisation staff noted particularly that the weekend had enabled parents to increase their own input into their children's opportunities for play.

*She really enjoyed it, had a lot going on at the time and it **gave her an opportunity to get out with her children and think about the needs of her children.** It was through taking them out of the home she realised how important it is to do activities with children. Especially the older ones who are always on their laptops at home, she thought they were occupied but they are actually bored. Realise she needs to involve the whole family in this. (Support organisation worker, Yorkshire and the Humber)*

*Really transforming experience. If anything we have done here in the past 12 months has been worthwhile it has been the Playing 2 Learn programme... **Gives socially excluded families the opportunity to learn new way of doing things.** (Support organisation worker, South East)*

Many families remembered specific activities from their weekend at Trafford Hall and recalled how the weekend had provided ideas for play as well as the confidence to make these play ideas a reality.

*I would say **it's probably the confidence thing, you know, knowing that you can do this sort of thing with your children and that you've got the confidence there to turn an old egg box into a crocodile and do things like that.** (Cathy)*

*I felt it would do wonders which it did. **It got me out focusing on different things. It took me back to when I was a kid as you forget when you get older.** (Ibrahim)*

*I enjoyed making the bugs, it was enjoyable. Nice break away from everything and everybody. **It was educational because I would never have thought of looking under rocks for bugs and that and then drawing them then making a model. It was good.** (Julie)*

Outcome 2: Parents’/Carers’ Input into Children’s Opportunities for Play

Before

Issue breakdown (before)	Families	Total
Ability to engage with children – family relationships, age gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li style="width: 50%;">• John <li style="width: 50%;">• Alice <li style="width: 50%;">• Emily <li style="width: 50%;">• Nicola <li style="width: 50%;">• Doreen <li style="width: 50%;">• Rosie <li style="width: 50%;">• Ian <li style="width: 50%;">• Karen <li style="width: 50%;">• Jenny <li style="width: 50%;">• Amala <li style="width: 50%;">• Julie 	11
Time and work pressures, everyday life pressures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li style="width: 50%;">• Cathy <li style="width: 50%;">• Alice <li style="width: 50%;">• Natalie <li style="width: 50%;">• Amanthi <li style="width: 50%;">• Doreen <li style="width: 50%;">• Peter <li style="width: 50%;">• Jessica <li style="width: 50%;">• Julie <li style="width: 50%;">• Eva <li style="width: 50%;">• Kusum & Jegan 	10
Lack of space/activities /facilities /ideas at home and in local area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li style="width: 50%;">• Jessica <li style="width: 50%;">• Nicola <li style="width: 50%;">• Ibrahim <li style="width: 50%;">• Rosie <li style="width: 50%;">• Jenny <li style="width: 50%;">• Karen <li style="width: 50%;">• Anna <li style="width: 50%;">• Emily 	8
Money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li style="width: 50%;">• Natalie <li style="width: 50%;">• Jessica <li style="width: 50%;">• Ian 	3

Example quotes, in addition to material on family pressures detailed in Section 4

As a family yeah it is hard, because there’s such a gap between them. You could do one thing for Mike but Emma’ll be like oh I don’t want to do that. (Jenny)

We need more things that are free for the kids to do, somewhere safe...there’s going to be loads of new things here but you’re going to have to pay for them. We have free swimming there at the moment. (Anna)

After

Positive outcomes	Families	Total
New ideas for play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natalie • Emily • Jessica • Amala • Ibrahim • Julie • Nicola • Eva • Kusum & Jegan • Karen • Rosie • John 	12
Understanding importance of play	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter • John • Doreen • Emily • Jessica • Eva • Amala • Ibrahim • Alice • Amanthi • Nicola 	11
Spending more time together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cathy • Peter • Doreen • Emily • Amala • Ibrahim • Eva • Rosie 	8
Ability to engage with children – family relationships, age gaps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ian • Julie • Jenny • Eva • Anna • Alice • Karen 	7
Awareness that play can be affordable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cathy • Ian • Anna • Kusum & Jegan • Emily 	5
Ongoing issues (after)	Families	Total
Still struggling to find time to play together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amanthi • Alice 	2

Example quotes

It made you realize how easy it is to do things together and how much time you waste sitting in front of the TV, sitting in front of...PCs and computers I don't like, I don't play them because I think they isolate you. [...], it's easy to have fun and to play and how much time we waste doing nothing. (Nicola)

Not everything has to cost a massive amount of money, as we found out that weekend. Walking down to the park for a couple of hours, that doesn't cost any money, it's free, it's right there. You can go and play in the playground and go for a walk, there are loads of places you can explore. (Cathy)

It sort of helped me to appreciate them more in a way because I think before that I wasn't really doing nothing much with them at all. It made me see them as little people. I see myself as not creative, I can't make or do anything, you know, I can't make things. And like they got us together you know making toys, making things and you can see the determination you know in their faces to make it you know. And we all worked together and done it and it was really good feeling and it really did help yeah. (Karen)

Yeah the kids loved the bug hunt. Haven't been able to do any of them, don't have time. I should try and make more time but I just don't seem to have time. (Alice)

It gave us practical tips on things that we can do with our children, to spend that quality time together and interacting with each other, learning new things. I learnt loads of new things on that weekend and it was things that the kids enjoyed. We have put a lot of it into practice since the weekend. (Cathy)

Everyday things that you could use to make things with. Even a piece of paper you had wrote on you could make something out of it. You wouldn't think of using your initiative. Now we do. We get all the toilet roll holders out and make things out of them. Before they would have gone in the recycling. You can get all your rubbish out of the recycling bag and reuse all that. So many different things. When we made the rocket with the egg in it and then threw it out the window, I thought that was fantastic. I wouldn't have thought of anything like that to do with them. I did think that was good. (Emily)

I came back understanding the importance of playing with my children and how, by playing with them I can sort certain problems just by playing games instead of shouting at or punishing them. It gave me a different way of sorting things out. I am happier and so are my children. (John)

I do it (play) more often now to keep the little ones occupied. TV isn't healthy. (Amala)

It properly opened my eyes to how important it is to spend time together. It taught me something. It explained the reasons and gives you strategies to do. (Ibrahim)

I didn't think it (playing together) was important at first but now I do. (Doreen)

Yes it has made us think about quality time more, but as I say we'd like to be able to do more of it but with them being at school, we don't get much chance really. (Rosie)

We had a quiz night when we were there (Trafford Hall), me and Emma have little quiz nights. We did try and do a treasure hunt but it's awkward because she likes to do everything herself, she doesn't want to have to wait for Mike to catch up. (Jenny)

Medium-Term Outcome 3: Younger children's ability to learn

The P2L programme was also designed to help improve the ability of younger children to learn and for their families to play a role in this learning. This was a relatively difficult measure for this qualitative evaluation due to various factors including the limited time frame during which we were in contact with the families and that contact was made with the family itself and the support organisation, and not

directly with the schools or teachers involved with the children. Furthermore, we had limited baseline information on the children's ability to learn prior to participation in the Playing 2 Learn programme. As described in Section Four, families had experienced difficulties with their children at school where children had been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders and related disorders including ADHD. There were other specific health issues that had some impact on their children's ability to learn. Other families mentioned their children experienced behavioural issues at school including attendance difficulties or problems around bullying, and just under half of the families had children that were receiving additional support in some form at school. Although just over half felt that their children were coping with school, and most parents and carers said they had positive relationships with schools and were confident to contact schools.

From our interviews with the families following their attendance on the P2L programme, the situation was little changed for the majority of the families. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest an increase in understanding among many families of their children's learning and how they themselves, as parents, can assist in this learning. However, it is also worth noting that for many of the families wider changes were also underway linked to their children's schooling, including increased support and moving schools.

- Those families struggling with Autism, related disorders or other specific health problems continued to struggle with these issues (affecting 3 of the 20 families). The same applied for the health problems mentioned by 2 families.
- Similarly, many of the children receiving additional support in school (including learning mentors, one to one support etc.) continued to do so (9/20).
- However, 4 families did talk about their children's behavioural improvements in school and the number of parents who felt their children were coping ok at school increased slightly from 11 to 13 families.

Linked to gaining new ideas for play as mentioned above, many families also acknowledged that the importance they attached to playing together as a family had also increased alongside their understanding of play and its role in their children's development.

I think play is important because they are learning off you as well even though you are probably not teaching them what they do in school but they are learning to share, learning to communicate and to wait for things, things like that, like at school you have to wait for your time whereas at home it's always his turn. So when he went to school he was like hang on, my turns not yet. I think it helps them develop more, by playing with them I think. (Jessica)

(Playing together is important) because it is doing something together and learning to communicate. Like when one wants to do one thing and the other wants to do another and they have to learn to do things one day and then other things another day. They learn things can be fun even when they haven't chosen it. (Amala)

Well it's having fun time isn't it and you're playing together, it's learning them how to get on, how to share you know. It's like it's like a skill you need in life, you're playing together, you're sort of sharing the good with someone else. You know, kids that can't play together, I think they have a lot of problems. (Karen)

Outcome 3: Younger children's ability to learn

Before

Issue breakdown (before)	Families	Total
Children coping OK at school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cathy • Natalie • Julie • Karen • Amanthi • Anna • Kusum & Jegan • Doreen • Alice • Ibrahim • Rosie 	11
Behaviour in school/attendance/bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natalie • Peter • Emily • Ibrahim • Jessica • Ian • Eva • Jenny • Anna • Nicola • Julie 	11
Children receiving additional support in school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter • John • Jessica • Ian • Emily • Jenny • Alice • Nicola • Rosie 	9
Autism and related conditions, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dyslexia, • dyspraxia, • attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) • learning disabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John • Emily • Eva 	3
Health issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jessica • Ian 	2

Example quotes in addition to material on family pressures detailed in Section 4

He's a bit behind, well quite a lot behind, in his reading and his literature side. That's why he has a SENCO for this. I think he has got a bit of a problem, but missing school hasn't helped. I am now worried about when he goes to secondary school, which is huge compared with where he is now. (Nicola)

After

Positive outcomes	Families	Total	
Children coping OK at school (NB. 11 continuing to cope Ok; 2 families felt coping had improved since the weekend)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cathy • Natalie • John • Doreen • Amala • Ibrahim • Julie 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anna • Alice • Rosie • Karen • Amanthi • Kusum & Jegan 	13
Behaviour improvements at school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter • Jessica • Ibrahim • Nicola 		4
Ongoing issues (after)	Families	Total	
Children receiving additional support in school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter • John • Jessica • Ian • Emily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jenny • Alice • Nicola • Rosie 	9
Children struggling still – behaviour/attendance/bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter • John • Ian • Jenny 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eva • Anna • Nicola • Rosie 	8
Autism and related conditions, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dyslexia, • dyspraxia, • attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) • learning disabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John • Emily • Eva 		3
Ongoing health issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jessica • Ian 		2

Example quotes

We have what are called Child in Need meetings with them every so often, we've got one coming up. We sit down with the teachers who have most contact with Lucy and they talk about how she is doing and we discuss where to go from there and what action would be best to take and that type of thing. I find them approachable. (Ian)

The school he goes to now, they appreciate him for being him...Before nobody would ever give him the time of day...We have CAF meetings as well at the school, and my worker from here will come with me, and they will express their concerns about the children if they have done anything. And they will show us what they have done, what they have achieved...They've explained to me you know the curriculum that they've set, what goes where and before I wouldn't have bothered, just looked around the room all day. But now, I am bothered about what they do. (Emily)

I noticed it straight away as soon as he went to that school...Because I think he was getting the attention he needed to help him, catch up and things like that, it helped him loads and it did change him and then gradually he went back into his old school as well, he had a few off days

because he has gone from 4 children to 26 again and it's a big jump but he's getting there, he is learning that he's got to do it and stay in there. (Jessica)

The teacher asked if I had changed things at home because he was being very good. I felt really proud I had done it. (Ibrahim)

She seems to be, they say she is doing OK. We have a parents evening coming up so I'll find out more but as far as I know she is coping fine. Her spelling and her reading are behind. She keeps up with it. Her maths, she has no problem with that, her sciences and her art – the ones she is good at she has no problems with. (Ian)

She is very disruptive when she wants to be. It's her anger, she can't control her temper, she don't know how to stop. (Jenny)

He'll say, I don't want to go to school, not going to school. Then you'll get him to school and he'll just act up and say just let me out of here...He has a diary and they have to write something good every day and I have to write something good every day. That worked for a while, still does a little...If I can't get him to school they will come and get him. (Anna)

The secondary school has made it clear and spoken to us about any reservations about him but they seem to be very pleased. They've had a little bit of bother once or twice, nothing major. But they put him down as one of the good boys so... (Rosie)

Just in the mornings she's in school. She loves it... well I just got her school report and it was brilliant... She loves books, she likes colouring books. (Doreen)

We've just had the report and Sophie's was ok actually, pretty good. (Julie)

Medium-Term Outcome 4: Parents' And Carers' Participation In The Community And Self-Esteem And Confidence Of Parents And Carers

Improved self-esteem and confidence of parents and increased participation in the local community was a specified objective of the P2L programme. A large number of the families who attended P2L weekends identified themselves as being isolated or lacking in confidence to some extent, thereby limiting their participation in the community, although around a third were active in their communities already, as detailed in Section Four.

During the interviews with the families following their attendance of the P2L programme, we asked various questions about how active in their communities the parents were and how confident they felt, both in parenting and in wider society. The key findings were:

- 5 families mentioned that they had noticed an improvement in their levels of activity and how included they felt.

- A further 6 families however noted little change and were continuing to experience difficulties.
- 6 families also pinpointed an improvement in their self-confidence within their own family unit and 3 families noted that they had increased their confidence in designing games and playing with their children.
- About half of families (11/20) felt that the weekend at Trafford Hall had served a valuable purpose in enabling them to meet other people and share experiences. For many of the parents this social activity and experience sharing provided a much needed confidence boost.

According to many of the support organisations we spoke to, the Playing 2 Learn weekend had a fundamental impact on the confidence and self-esteem of lots of the families involved.

*I believe that the **family's confidence has improved**. They have used many of the tools that were provided subsequent to the weekend. Kusum has recently led some play activities at our drop in. They have increased the amount of time and breath of activities. Manisha's confidence has improved dramatically. That said, she has just started school. But I feel the combination of experiences has been extremely beneficial. (Support organisation worker, London)*

*All the families have got so much out of the weekends. They have been suffering from a poverty of aspiration, they have no confidence or belief in themselves. We have families who have not been out of the estate. There are people in their 30s who have never been on a train by themselves....**The programme counters the pathology of failure and disappointment...**There is nothing else like it around. (Support organisation worker, South East)*

Another clear theme which came through from many of the families was the value they attached to the opportunity to speak to other families, from all over the country, about their experiences. Sharing problems and experiences of family life enabled many of the parents to gain confidence and to feel less alone in their situations.

***I think we realised lots of people have different types of problems and you have to take each day at time.** (Rosie)*

*You didn't feel on your own. **You suddenly realize that your problems weren't so bad, you know, you weren't on your own as you thought you were.** And with the other people there, as you were talking to these people, people were coming up with, quite openly talking about your problems, and cos you talk about them they don't seem so bad, and other people were saying well have you tried this or that, helping each other. (Nicola)*

Yes, that did help and as I say all the children interacting and getting along and you suddenly realized that you don't really have to spend a

lot of money, there are things there that you can just get along and do. It was nice to meet the other families and know you weren't on your own and that it was happening to other people. There were two families there with husbands as well and you sort of thought well it's not just because I'm on my own with the kids, it's not because I'm single with the kids, it happens to everyone. We were all from different walks of life and it was a really nice weekend. (Nicola)

I do feel more confident in myself. I've come so far. If you had seen me two years ago, when I was at my all-time low, you know, I didn't care about anything. It was just another everyday plod along. (Emily)

Like I said, I did walk away with a bit more confidence that I could actually achieve my goals if I put my mind to it. (Emily)

Outcome 4: Parents'/carers' participation in the community and Self-esteem/confidence of parents

Before

Issue breakdown (before)	Families	Total
Social isolation and exclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cathy • Natalie • John • Emily • Nicola • Ian • Anna • Alice • Amanthi • Kusum & Jegan 	10
Lack of confidence within family – engagement with children/boundaries /discipline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emily • Eva • Nicola • Karen • Jessica • Ibrahim • Jenny • Rosie • Kusum & Jegan 	9
Lack of facilities or opportunities to be active in the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • John • Nicola • Alice • Asanthi 	4
Family circumstances – relationship breakdown	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Julie • Karen • Eva • Anna 	4
Confident/active /involved in community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cathy • Peter 	2

Example quotes

Kate isn't comfortable in big groups, groups of friends yes ok but not groups of strangers. I know you get to know these people. We did a thing 2 or 3 years ago at Family Support, where parents would come and talk about things and then they would come up with suggestions for other parents. Sharing experiences and how to help other parents who had the same problem but couldn't come up with a solution. We went to that which she enjoyed. You had a cup of tea and talked, and people had a bit of a laugh but that was only for a set period again. But she is not

comfortable in groups of people she doesn't know, groups of friends, like I say, she is ok with. That's why we have the group of friends who come round, they will come and have a cuppa and have a natter. (Ian)

After

Positive outcomes	Families	Total	
Playing 2 Learn as an opportunity to meet new people and share experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jenny • Eva • Nicola • Rosie • Karen • Kusum & Jegan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter • Natalie • Emily • Amala • Julie 	11
Increased confidence within family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cathy • John • Emily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amala • Ibrahim • Eva 	6
Improving social inclusion and activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natalie • Peter • John 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emily • Ibrahim 	5
Increased confidence in designing games/play/learning activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jessica • Rosie • Kusum & Jegan 		3
Ongoing issues (after)	Families	Total	
Family circumstances – continuing difficulties/no change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alice • Julie • Anna 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alice • Nicola • Amanthi 	6

Example quotes

The weekend helped a lot, meeting new people was one of the things I had a lot of problems with. (Natalie)

It was nice to spend time together. It's nice and there was a group of people as well so you know you're not totally on your own. (Natalie)

Feel more active, want to do more with the family. (Peter)

John's confidence in his ability as a parent has increased noticeably. Both family cohesion and focus on family play has improved. He, now, is aware of the importance of play in a child's development and in general family life. He is engaging with the family centre on a more regular basis and is more content with his position as a lone parent. (Support worker on John)

I didn't feel so alone being a parent, or in the dark. All the other parents there were experiencing the same thing...Like I said, I did walk away with a bit more confidence that I could actually achieve my goals if I put my mind to it. (Emily)

To go to Trafford Hall and meet groups of people you had never ever seen, you know, a lot of you are all in the same situation, the other people's experiences with their children. I am still in contact with some of them. (Emily)

I didn't really have any expectations really, up to a point where I thought it would work like magic and everything would be set when I get home. I just needed some kind of confidence boost and it did give me more confidence. I came away from there...and it just helped so much. (Emily)

When Ibrahim got back, he was buzzing, it really built his confidence and he told me he put into practice some of the things he learnt...I can't remember exactly but they were play activities. A lot was covered in the evaluation afterwards and he said he had done things at home as a result. (Support organisation worker)

She was worried about it. She was worried. I think, yeah, one of her worries was she wouldn't enjoy it because there were strangers, another worry was Lucy and how she would react to it all. But yeah I think she was worried about all the people, strangers and how she would get on with them. It went alright, there was a couple of families who we got on with. (Ian and Kate)

I thought it was good to hear other people had problems too... Yeah, I think the staff made it quite easy for me because my head wasn't really there at the beginning but they helped out quite a lot. Just asking if you were alright then, it was a bit weird at first to have a random stranger ask you that but they meant it as well. They meant it, it wasn't like they were just prying into your business. (Julie)

I am not really bothered about what people think anymore. I used to be. Before I went to Trafford Hall I used to, you know if we were walking to school and he was having a paddy and people were looking at me, I'd be like oh no and want the ground to swallow me up but now I don't care. Ben is Ben end of and if people don't like that then tough, I do my best and that's it, that's all I can do. I don't care anymore and I just want Ben sorted. (Eva)

I was all panicky about going, I was more scared of going but because we could go together it was alright...I would go again but I still wouldn't go on my own. (Anna)

Too shy to get involved with anything. Plus I am too busy with the children to look for them (community activities/events). (Alice)

I feel quite isolated sometimes with regards to friends because I feel if I don't go to see them...if I don't make the effort, they don't come to see me. And I do get isolated and feel very much on my own, and then that gets me down. (Nicola)

I was nervous but part of me was looking forward to meeting other families and thinking...cos I don't get to meet many people to be honest. (Nicola)

I suppose I've always been too involved in my own problems to get active in anything else but I don't know I'd never really thought of it...

Any events that they have on, where the kids sort of do anything, I come along yes. (Karen)

No, we don't take any part. We are new to the area. So I don't go anywhere. I don't take part in anything. (Amanthi)

Here, no parents, no-one here. We are alone here. My husband has two sisters but we don't know them...They are not helping before when we had a lot of problems but they are not helping, nothing. (Kusum)

Longer-Term Outcomes after 12-24 Months

In addition to the 20 interviews carried out with families around six to nine months after they had attended a P2L weekend at Trafford Hall, we followed up five of these families between 12 and 24 months after the weekend. We ensured that the sample, although not a representative sample, was made up of different family types, household composition and geographical location. Despite these differences the families re-interviewed shared many experiences and feelings about parenting as well as the P2L weekend itself.

Families had experienced many critical life changes in a relatively short space of time, including dealing with family bereavements, serious ill health, changing employment status, moving home, gaining qualifications, reconciliation as well as separation from partners, as well as new children joining the family. The children specifically had experienced various changes including increasing or decreasing additional support at school and more generally, moving schools. These changing family circumstances and experiences support and further illustrate the various stresses and pressures facing the families discussed in Section Four above.

The progress of the families re-interviewed was mixed. Some were coping well and had experienced positive developments including gaining confidence in their own abilities as parents and within their local communities, in addition to children progressing well in school. For others the experience was more varied, with significant challenges emerging or with little change to their overall situation or in the behaviour of children.

I think we are coping OK. *When I am working he is looking after her, and when he is working I am looking after her. We don't get anyone else to look after her...It is difficult but we are managing. We are tired.*
(Kusum)

Ok, good. We have had a couple of tragedies in the family and I have been keeping calm... *I keep busy. I go on long walks to clear my head. I like walking. I also go window shopping. I find that very therapeutic. Also I have a grandchild now. My eldest daughter got married last year and she has calmed down a lot which means we have calmed down. My youngest children have gone to school now so I have more time. My older children help out with my younger children. One of them will take*

them out for an hour to give me some space. I feel like I have more energy and strength now. (Amala)

People say I am doing well. I like to hear it. My support worker or family worker would tell you that straight away. I do a lot of the right stuff but I need someone to tell me I am doing good. (Ibrahim)

Family interaction

For many families, their priorities for the future involved spending time together, and going on a holiday as a family. Going away on holiday was something that few had much experience of before, except for travelling to Trafford Hall in some cases.

We are hopefully going away in October for a week to Majorca, which the children are looking forward to, because unfortunately they have had two holidays cancelled...And Jodie especially because she has never been on a plane, she has never been abroad. (Rosie)

We were so happy to travel there because we never go on long trips – it was the first time we had been on a long journey and everyone enjoyed it. (Kusum and Jegan)

Nearly all (4/5) of the families did identify that the weekend had helped them in their family life in some way and made a difference to them.

I think it's helped, even though I interacted with him before, it helps, the weekend shows you how the interaction helps the children a lot more I think so it makes you feel like you are actually needed I suppose. Because sometimes you're busy and you'll be like sit down and do this and they'll be sitting on their own doing it and are obviously not interested because they are on their own. So it makes you realise that if you take that 5 minutes or 10 minutes then you can get on after that and they will be entertained after that. (Jessica)

He has always been one for wanting to do things with me. I think the weekend just makes it easier, you can see ways of getting them interested a lot more. (Jessica)

I think it made us think about spending time with the children as much as we could but obviously we can't spend as much time as we would like because they don't want to spend that much time with us but we do our best. (Rosie)

I didn't see it as a course; afterwards it sunk in that it was a course. I have said to people you should go on the weekend. It is something different and it opens your eyes. (Ibrahim)

I can't pinpoint any changes but I know there have been changes. Playing together. I can't remember me playing as much with my others. I am spending more time with Jamal. People around me here they have noticed a different me, with my kids and other people's kids. They say

'you are great with kids'. I don't think they would say that if I wasn't. I am confident with my kid but not others and if people say I am with others. (Ibrahim)

Not noticed a lot but the kids are calmer in general. Things are going well. I am a lot stronger and firmer. Not such a push over anymore. It was a fresh start to make me stop, think and chill and then start afresh with things. (Amala)

Parents' and carers' input into children's opportunities for play

All families remembered the P2L weekends, some had impressionistic memories whilst others had clear and distinct memories of specific activities and events.

I actually remember it all because it was quite fun and the kids liked it. I remember it all still – it's a bit vague but I do remember. (Jessica)

I remember the rocket making, we stuck pictures on the wall – we did like a big frieze around the room, I think everyone drew or painted something to stick on it, I remember the walk through the woods looking for bugs and the games they played in the gardens and generally talking to the other parents that were there, we were the only grandparents, but it was interesting to talk to them. (Rosie)

The egg rocket, the shadow puppet show, and the icicle hunt. Everybody enjoyed those. There were so many inside games as well. (Kusum)

I remember going on walks and the games, like the memory game. And things in the classroom. You had to remember things and write them down. We built a rocket in class, I remember that. (Amala)

Egg throwing and the rocket. We had to build a rocket and had to throw an egg and see how far we could get it without it cracking. Box painting was fun. Made models out of boxes. (Ibrahim)

All of the families had also continued to use at least some of the specific activities they learned during the P2L weekend when back at home, though often with some adaptation. Even those with only impressions or vague memories could name specific activities they had continued to do.

We do some activities but not the same ones because we don't have a big garden... Very different ideas – good ideas. She made a rocket last week but with no egg! (Kusum)

I think the activities and that, it gives you more idea of things you can do actually so it bounces off what you can do at home, like the bug hunt I could take him to the little woods and let him look for bugs there and he would be made up because he loves animals, it's something that he would like to do. (Jessica)

We do still play the memory game...They like to make up their own games. They are not interested in toys. They use their imaginations and play with paper, string and cardboard. (Amala)

All families felt that playing together as a family was important although had different ideas on why and how this was the case.

*It gives them their social skills and helps them develop better I think because you are interacting with them, no matter what you are doing, they are still, **they thrive on that interaction.** (Jessica)*

Yes, it is important for mum and dad to spend time with them, playing and reading. I like playing with them and they enjoy it. (Amala)

*Yes to keep them occupied. **They can learn things off you whilst they are playing.** It shows you are keeping an eye on things that he has picked up on. (Ibrahim)*

*I think if the children will get involved with you, **it just helps you bond together...** (Rosie)*

*We enjoy spending time together. **She is happy to do activities and we enjoy it because she enjoys it.** We always want her to be happy. (Kusum and Jegan)*

Younger children's ability to learn

The children specifically had experienced various changes including increasing or decreasing additional support at school, repeating a year, and more generally, moving schools. For some families, children were progressing well in school and parents were confident in dealing with the school and making changes.

...My daughter was at college and they phoned to say she was falling behind. So I keep involved and tell them to call me if anything like that happens. She got some extra classes and is now doing well. (Amala)

*She likes going to school – likes the teachers a lot. **It is easy to go and see them and we have parents meetings every 2 months.** (Kusum and Jegan)*

For others the experience was more mixed, with significant challenges emerging or with little change in the behaviour of children. Two of the five families talked about the additional support that their children received both within school through learning mentors and SENCOs as well as outside of school.

*Well, she has just got a mentor...she has been out once with her and hopefully the second time will be next week...**because it's a younger person she probably relates to her more than me,** and she likes going to the shops and things like that. (Rosie)*

Ok I think, I think anyway. Charlie has been statemented since we last spoke for behavioural problems. So he isn't like a normal 8 year old, he is quite a handful at the best of times. (Jessica)

Parents' and carers' participation in the community, and self-esteem and confidence of parents and carers

For many, one of the most important features of the weekend was the support gained from spending time and sharing experiences with other families as well as with the P2L trainers who were able to engage and involve the children in activities.

It was needed weekend to be on my own with the kids. It was a good place to chill and meet different types of people. You see that everyone has problems and it made me think if that person can cope then so can I. I am not the only one suffering. (Amala)

They were very enthusiastic people I think and I think the workers played a big part in it, they got all the adults involved, they wouldn't let the adults sit down either. It made the kids feel like, ok they got my mum and dad up so they responded better. Everyone was just doing it, because you didn't have a choice! (Jessica)

...watching the play leaders coming out with different things and they were dead easy. Anyone could do it. It was clever how they done it. The kids didn't get bored once. (Ibrahim)

Everyone was very friendly, we talked with them, the other parents, some of them had a lot of problems, parents could share. (Kusum)

All families re-emphasised in the follow-up interviews the vital role that the support organisations continue to play in their daily family lives. For many, the support organisation was considered the very first point of contact when experiencing difficulties, in advance of family and friends in some cases.

We come here every week and we volunteer here now... We don't do any other community activities – just here (Kusum and Jegan)

Yeah I do [still use the support organisation], obviously he is a bit older now but if I ever need any support or help or when I say this has happened I still come here. (Jessica)

If I have a big problem then I would phone [my support worker] at Sure Start. I can talk to them and drop in even though my children have gone to school now. (Amala)

All families had aspirations and plans for the future. For some families this was associated with the parent's/carers' ambitions in terms of education, qualifications or employment.

I did my Health and Safety NVQ level 2 for free. I want to do the level 3 at college but it costs £500 now...it's still cheaper than other places

where it costs £1800...I had my job already but want to do the level 3 to get a better job. (Kusum)

I would like to give the two little ones more time and space. I would like to go to college after Christmas. (Amala)

More and more recently I have been thinking that if I don't get back on the buses then I would like to set up my own little business. A place like this, cheap food for people from all walks of life. It doesn't matter whether you are barrister on 200k a year or someone on benefits. Doing that here because I was working in restaurants from being a kid and I am thinking might be able to do it. I was a waiter then and now I can cook I can see myself doing it. That is something that I want to do it long term. (Ibrahim)

6. Process evaluation

In this section, we look at the findings from the process evaluation which assessed how the programme was implemented, participant satisfaction with the events, the quality of the delivery of the weekend events, and relationships between Trafford Hall and the participants and referral agencies. A key issue discussed here is the vital role that the support organisations themselves play in the delivery of the programme alongside the team at Trafford Hall.

General satisfaction with the P2L weekends

Families generally had very positive reports of the weekends spent at Trafford Hall, mentioning specifically:

- the friendliness and support of the staff team (P2L trainers and wider Trafford Hall staff team)
- the fun and easy to do activities
- the food and not having to cook or clean
- the opportunity to be away from home with no distractions and have quality time with the family, and other families.

None of it was difficult, they didn't make anything difficult this is what I mean, it was all enjoyable, it was a fun weekend. All the activities were just fun activities, if you didn't get it right, you didn't get it right, nobody was taking anything seriously. It was all pretty easy going. The mealtimes, everyone enjoyed the mealtimes, it was all different. (Ian)

I enjoyed the weekend, Luke loved it. He was a bit worried when we first got there as there were a lot of little ones. He was very quiet when we first got there... (Nicola)

The weekend has been fantastic. We have all joined in and great fun, made loads of friends, haven't laughed so much in years. (Karen)

I wouldn't say you were forced to do things with your kids there but there were no distractions, no telephone, no someone knocking at the door for a chat, it was you and the kids and that was it. So you had to do something with them, there was nothing there to distract you. (Eva)

Quality of delivery

Playing 2 Learn was designed around the whole family and the staff team at Trafford Hall worked flexibly based on the composition and demographic make-up of each weekend to try to ensure that activities were as well suited to as many children and adults as possible. The weekends were designed to be flexible to accommodate the specific needs of the group of families attending, which emerged over the course of the events. Based on feedback from the support organisations, families themselves, and observations of the courses by the researchers, the programme delivered on this. For example, during one weekend the theme of the weekend had to be adapted to cater for the specific group. There were lots of babies and toddlers and so the trainers suggested the families may need some time just to play, like a playtime at school, outside of the organised activities, when the kids could just run around with the parents' supervision.

There is a great deal of flexibility in the delivery of the programme and this enables the training team to be creative and consider individual needs and family needs and respond as much as possible to these needs. This gives families the best opportunity to enjoy themselves. (Playing 2 Learn Trainer)

However, in our interviews, one family felt that there was a slight difficulty with their grandson being quite a bit older than the other children attending. However, this was resolved by the staff team at Trafford Hall acting flexibly and giving the boy the responsibility of helping out the staff instead.

*The only thing that I could say about that is Matthew was the eldest one there, there was quite a few years age gap between him and the others. Which was a bit of a shame really for him, he didn't join in with the little ones as much but he enjoyed it. **They made sure he was included, like he helped and things like that. Gave him a bit of responsibility, he wasn't left out but it would have been nice if there had been someone more his age.** (Rosie)*

Support workers from support organisations have also mentioned that they felt having more activities available for older children and teenagers would be beneficial to the programme.

Be better if there was more things there geared for the older children. A lot of families have a range of ages. (Support organisation worker, Yorkshire and the Humber)

One support worker also felt that some families may have concerns due to language/cultural/religious beliefs about attending a weekend without support of others from the same background. Again, the Trafford Hall team made efforts to ensure that families were supported as much as possible and to ensure that all specific requirements, including attending a weekend with a friend from home for example, were met, whilst also encouraging the building of tolerance and understanding among different communities. This approach was observed during weekends when the evaluation team attended and also supported from feedback from families and support organisations.

It offered them an opportunity to be away from their everyday existence. Have quality time. Amala was having a difficult time and it was about moving away from that and learning new things. What we do here and combine that. They seemed to get on with other families despite some anxiety beforehand about fitting in due to different cultures. It helped her that Ibrahim was there and he could speak in the same language with her. (Support organisation worker, Yorkshire and the Humber)

I was all panicky about going, I was more scared of going but because we could go together [with a friend from home area] it was alright. (Anna)

Support organisations role in programme delivery

Playing 2 Learn worked well in collaboration and coordination with the support organisations and helped to reinforce the work of these organisations. Many support workers that we spoke to felt that **Playing 2 Learn helped support the work that support organisations were themselves doing with the families over the longer term.**

It is a great opportunity for families who don't go away together. It's a lovely place. The content is what we are doing with families here. That play and spending time does not have to be about expense. So it develops our own work and they have a chance to get away. (Support organisation worker, Yorkshire and the Humber)

Yes it is what we do in day to day learning through play, positive parenting and play styles. It supports what we do. (Support organisation worker, North West)

Playing 2 Learn does support work that we are doing about learning through play. It helps open people up to what we are trying to do...Lots of the parents we have and send on weekends are so young and have never had any opportunity to play themselves. It is similar to the

parenting programme we run, about active listening etc. (Support organisation worker, South East)

*I think one of the issues with our clients is they are very very excluded from the mainstream. They see themselves as, I think because of the way that a lot of British people in society view them, so they are not part of it, so they do things like differently, and I don't know maybe centres such as this maybe reaffirm that kind of thing because it is all people from a similar situation but the good thing about this, and the families made comments about this, was **the fact that it was totally mixed so it gave them the opportunity to be with others, it wasn't just asylum seekers, refugees, it was just families.** From that perspective, it's really good and the families this time commented on that, and how they thought this was really positive. They didn't put it in those terms but about how it was just everybody and you just mixed. I think that was quite positive. (Support organisation worker, London)*

Whilst the administration, management and delivery of the Playing 2 Learn programme was based at Trafford Hall, **the effectiveness of the programme was heavily dependent upon the commitment and collaboration of the numerous support organisations** that referred families onto the courses and completed the evaluation work with the families in the months following each course. We spoke to and visited nine support organisations which had sent parents on the Playing 2 Learn weekends. From these interviews and conversations, some key themes emerged as being vital to maintaining the strong relationship between support organisations and the programme:

Communication: it was vital to keep strong communication links open between the Trafford Hall Playing 2 Learn team and the support organisations themselves. Everyone involved in working with the family needed to stay informed on progress and developments.

Trust: the support organisations had and need to maintain the trust of the families involved. The families attended the weekends on the suggestion of, and with the assistance of, the support organisations who appeared, in the eyes of the families, ultimately responsible for what happened on the weekend. The priority for those working within the support organisations was to maintain their relationship with the family. Linking both communication and trust was the need for there to be regular and up to date information from Trafford Hall about the programme for support organisations to pass on to families.

*In a way I would like to visit. **If I had been it would be good to be able to actually describe things to families and to reassure.** Be good if Trafford Hall had a weekend for workers so they know really well what it is. In terms of supporting parents that would be good, so we could describe the rooms used. (Support organisation worker, Yorkshire and the Humber)*

The trust that families placed both in their own support organisation and in the Trafford Hall team was very important. Families rely upon the support organisations to be able to trust where they are going for the P2L weekend and what they are going to be doing.

Families rely on us to be able to trust where they are going and what they are going to do. (Support organisation worker, North West)

It was important that this was acknowledged and that families were provided with adequate information about the weekend and its content to feel fully prepared and to ensure that unreasonable expectations were not built up by the support organisations in a bid to encourage families to participate. It is also important that the families were not 'sold' the weekend as a 'holiday' which was not the purpose of the weekend to ensure that they are adequately prepared for all the weekend involved.

At the end of Year 1, Trafford Hall ran a mini-conference for support organisations involved with the programme to allow them to ask questions about the weekends, feedback any concerns and other issues, and visit the Centre itself to see where families spent the P2L weekends. The issue of sharing information between Trafford Hall and the support organisations themselves was raised as part of this mini-conference and as a result of views expressed by the support organisations involved, there were some amendments made to the application forms for the weekends that allowed support workers to pass on more information about families, to enable the P2L team at Trafford Hall to better understand and prepare for needs of specific families.

Both trust and communication needed to be sensitively managed on the P2L programme. Overall, support organisations felt this had happened. There was a complex set of relationships and lines of confidentiality. The P2L team at Trafford Hall received confidential information from support organisations in advance of families attending the weekends and feedback after the weekends.

They are really good at keeping in touch with us, I would say the communication's great. If I have had any queries I will email or ring Sam and she will get straight back to me, and vice versa as well I would say. They have been fantastic. (Support organisation worker, Yorkshire and the Humber)

Sam sends me the information. I feel like I know her personally even though we have only ever exchanged emails...I got invited to the evaluation they [Trafford Hall] did last year which was good, felt our concerns were listened to. I would say they are one of the agencies that are easy to work with. (Support organisation worker, North West)

They have been brilliant, they are really really helpful. They have been here, they came down to speak to some of the clients which was good actually, since then we've had loads of people wanting to go...They

came down to speak to them and explained the programme. (Support organisation worker, London)

Trafford Hall staff fed back to the support organisations on families' experiences following each weekend. This process was managed well with support organisation workers feeling that the lines of communication with Trafford Hall were open and that they were kept up to date with events and activities over the weekend. There was only one exception in our sample of families, where a family felt uncomfortable with what they understood to be lines of communication between P2L and their support organisation. This family was extremely positive about the weekend, but they would not recommend the programme to other families because of their perception of a specific incident:

*This is where it all falls down. The experience was good to begin with, we enjoyed the weekend. **I won't say we didn't enjoy the weekend because we did...but she [partner] wouldn't recommend it to anyone else, which is a bit of a shame because it was a good weekend.** (Ian)*

Administrative burden and cost: in order to thoroughly evaluate the programme, demands were placed upon the support organisations, as the main point of contact for the families, to chase up on this and to return relevant information to Trafford Hall. Some representatives from support organisations felt that the administrative burden upon them was quite large.

We felt as a project who had referred families to the weekends, there was a big expectation from us, to ask families to complete diaries, questionnaires and further activities to follow the holidays. Although it was really lovely to take part in the evaluation, this did take some organising and transportation of families, which took us away from our core work for most of the day. (Support organisation worker, North West)

However, in general the response rate for the three month evaluation forms is relatively high overall, for example: of the 205 families attending weekends, 127 three month evaluation forms were returned via the support organisations to Trafford Hall – a total response rate of around 62%.

The evaluation and performance management is the same that is required for everything we do. (Support organisation worker, South East)

[The evaluation has] not been a problem...If you haven't seen the family in a while, it is a good way of re-engaging them and a way of meeting up. (Support organisation worker, North West)

The cost of supporting families to attend the programme was also identified by support organisation representatives as something that may become more difficult to manage as funding streams become tighter as a result of the current economic climate.

*We do have a problem with transport. Quite a few of the families here do not have the funds for travel. **With all the cutbacks here we cannot guarantee the funds for travel.** We might have a bit in the bursary and that would be ok. Ibrahim is a volunteer here so he drove the minibus last time door to door. But some families would have to get a train and a taxi and aside from the expense it sometimes feels too big for them. We have looked at the possibility of a member of staff to drive them in the mini bus. That would depend on whether they would be willing to give up their time. We could arrange an airport taxi service to do but it would depend on the bursary. That travelling is the one thing that might put families off.* (Support organisation worker, Yorkshire and the Humber)

Around 25% of the total families attending over the three year programme received a travel bursary from Trafford Hall to attend P2L.

Flexibility: support organisations identified that given the chaotic lives that many of the families involved in the programme lead, the more flexible the administration and delivery of the programme could be, the better. As mentioned above, the course was delivered with flexibility and adaptation built in so that each weekend delivered as much as possible for the families attending. For many families on the courses making the decision to come away for the weekend was a serious commitment that took many outside of their natural comfort zones. Many families mentioned that it was the first and only time they had spent time together as a family in this way, and for others it was the first time they had travelled independently away from their home area.

*It's a big deal for families as they don't know anyone, it is away from home and some families may never have been away from home before and that can sometimes add to the stress. **Kath has said that sometimes she can spend the majority of the weekend with one family if they have particular needs.*** (Support Organisation worker, North West)

*I was out of my comfort zone, the travelling wasn't a problem because I am quite used to travelling on trains, coaches long distance. I thought I was going to spend time with just Luke, and that would be nice, and maybe get to know him a bit better. I know it sounds funny because he's my son but **I think when you're on your own and you've got other children it's easy to, you know just concentrate on the problem at the time, so whoever is making the most noise gets the attention.*** (Nicola)

7. Conclusions

Playing 2 Learn was felt by local family support workers to be a stretching challenge for vulnerable, complex families. It required families to travel away from home, sometimes long distances, to meet other families they did not know, and expose themselves to new experiences. The evaluation suggests that some of the most distressed families were able to meet this challenge, and benefited from it. The value of the residential setting was to help families to try new things – venture into an unknown and unfamiliar environment, get mucky with their children in messy play, meet people from new cultures, and simply have time to talk to other parents who were accepting of them and their family. For families who tended not to go away together, the P2L weekends were a rare, high value ‘treat’ and break, offering the chance for quality time to rediscover the pleasure of playing together and interacting as a family, as well as being a learning experience.

It would seem that the value of P2L was also in the hands-on approach. Through families being able to see and do the play activities, the ideas stayed with people up to two years after the weekends when the evaluation took place. Many of the families on the programme were going through tough times that play alone could not resolve. However, the benefits of playing together and spending time as a family were strongly felt by participants, despite many other pressures.

The Trafford Hall P2L Co-ordinator described the overall aim of the programme as offering people: “*positive memories of being able to spend time together as a family*” (Trafford Hall P2L team member) and that the weekends will be a “*snapshot removed from the everyday*” (Trafford Hall P2L programme manager) – an opportunity for families to relate and interact differently, which may then help people once back in their normal, everyday lives at home to do things differently. The idea is based upon families enjoying the weekend and retaining the positive memories from the weekend of family time and enjoyable activities as something to draw on for inspiration when they return to their often challenging daily lives. It seems that the snapshot of fun but constructive learning on the weekends stayed in families’ minds, and helped them work and pull together when back at home.

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