

Play2Nurture

Our story so far

March 2023



Play2Nurture – the project and how it works

This report covers the first year of operation of Play Gloucestershire’s Play2Nurture project from January to December 2022. The project has been awarded £240,119 over three years from The National Lottery Community Fund.

The overall aim of the project is to use the therapeutic power of play to create the conditions where children facing adversity build resilience and have better chances in life.

The project seeks to develop Play Gloucestershire’s emerging play nurture approach, which builds on 15 years’ experience of running a universal Play Ranger service in disadvantaged local communities and targeted work in school settings. **The play nurture approach works with small groups of identified children using the therapeutic power of play to offer respite from and to help children cope with the ups and downs of daily economic and emotional hardships. In this, the Play Rangers work at the intersection of playwork and play therapy.**

The project is **led by highly experienced playwork practitioners**, one of whom is also qualified in play therapy and a second who is about to start a postgraduate course in therapeutic play skills. They work with a **team of Play Rangers, young volunteers** and a **Pets as Therapy qualified dog, Rafa**.

The project works across three locations:

- **The Play Sanctuary**
(our small, dedicated play space)
- **Ayland Garden Open Space**
(open access community sessions in a local park)
- **Oxstalls Campus of the University of Gloucestershire**
(a beautiful natural space for playing during school holidays).



Year One in Statistics

The project has had a very successful first year:



501 Hours of Play Nurture

97 Children have taken part in out of school activities

88 Children have taken part in school lunchtime sessions

87 After school sessions

22 School lunch time sessions

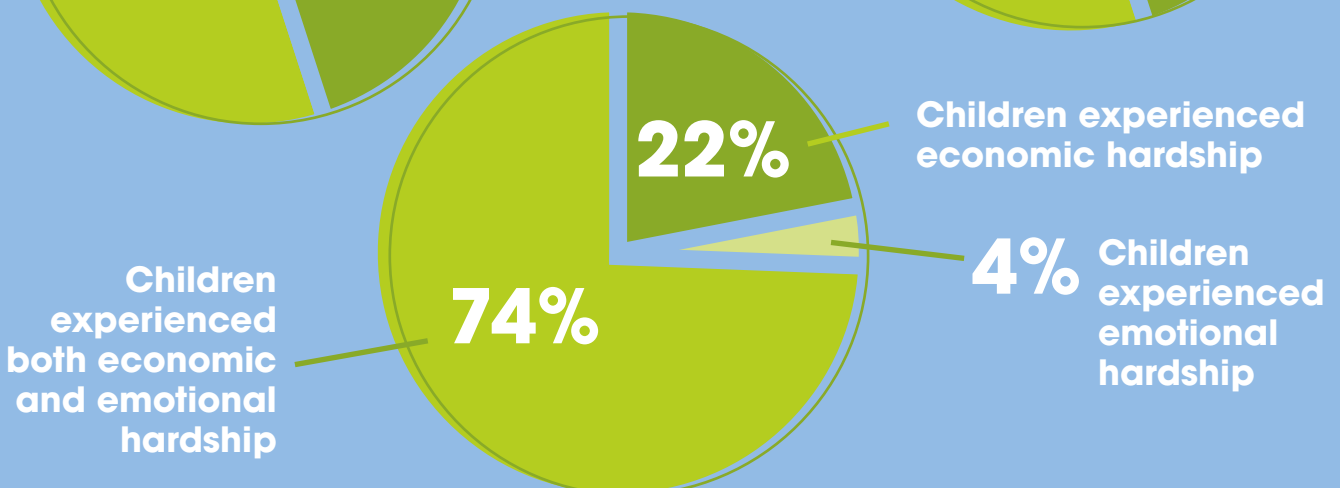
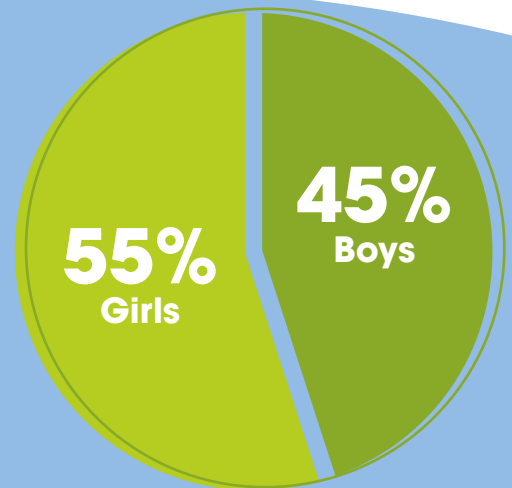
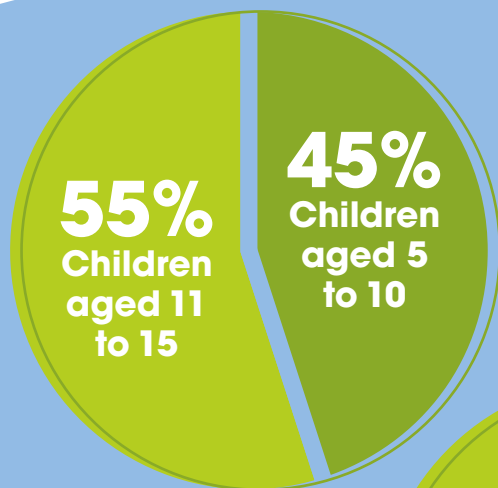
47 Holiday play days 

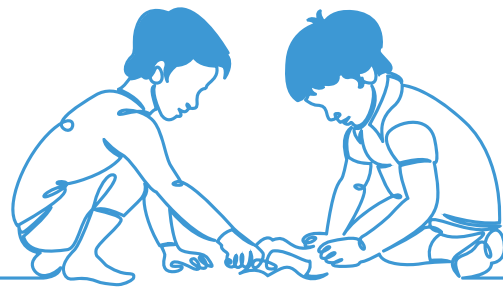
17% Children with disabilities



32 Super Saturday sessions

31% Participants are black, asian or minority ethnic children





Helping children experiencing economic and emotional hardships

The service is targeted at those experiencing emotional and/or economic hardship who live or go to school within a one-mile radius of The Play Sanctuary, which is located in Barton and Tredworth, a diverse area of Gloucester where 25% of children are living in poverty, there are far higher than national average levels of deprivation as measured on the Child Wellbeing Index, and 39% of households have no car.

Developmental Approach

We have approached the project in a developmental way, seeking to actively learn from both successes and challenges. As a part of this, key team members have had regular reflective practice sessions with Toucan For Children, a local VCS organisation offering play therapy, and have worked collaboratively and reflectively with an external evaluator specialising in children's play and playwork (Dr Wendy Russell).

We have worked proactively and consciously with our evaluator to support us to develop the play nurture approach, using an ongoing and collaborative process of 'account-ability' (developing ways to document and account for their practice) and 'response-ability' (an ongoing responsiveness aimed at developing the practice). The approach also helps us to articulate the value of the work we do. The evaluation design has offered a structure for regular meetings using two blended and adapted tools, namely theory of change and critical cartography (mapping).

Involving people from our local community

Our key community is the children, who are members both of the local community and of the growing Play2Nurture community. Our playwork approach means that we make changes to our practice in response to what we learn about the children through observation and the mapping. We regularly modify the environment, provide specific resources and do things differently in response to what we learn. One example is the foot spa:

“It was hot tonight and by the time the children arrived at The Play Sanctuary after walking back with the play team from school, they looked frazzled. One girl in particular complained of very hot feet so I got a trug and filled it up with cold water from the outside tap. She sat there with her bare feet in it, enjoying the feeling, making satisfied noises and she decided to call it the ‘foot spa’. It looked so good that a boy requested his own foot spa and so the two of them sat side by side with happy faces, made happier when Ranger Charlie brought out really cold watermelon from the fridge. One of them asked to play some tunes over the Bluetooth speaker and we all bobbed about to music from around the world – Arabic, Romanian and Czech – the tunes these children hear and play at home. It felt a special moment, not at all the music I expected to hear but all the richer for it and a pleasure shared by all of us.”

Play Ranger

As well as this, we decided early on to run one open access session a week in the local park both for our Play2Nurture children and for the local community. This has meant that our work is visible to the community. It has helped to build relationships with families and also with referrals onto the project. It also offers the possibility for some of the Play2Nurture children to continue contact with the staff and project once their term of sessions is over.

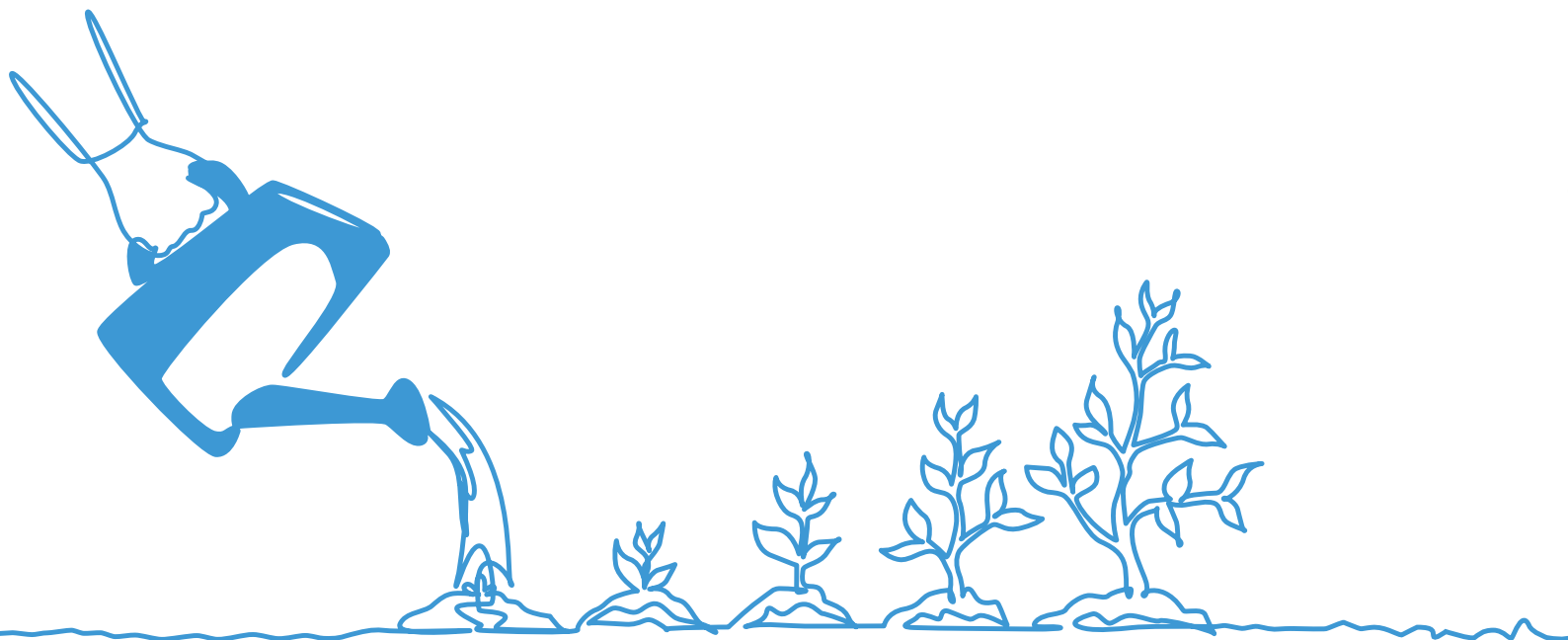


One of our catchment schools is quite a way from The Play Sanctuary and we decided at the start that we would collect the children from school and take them home after the sessions. This has made the project more accessible and has become an integral part of our play offer and has helped us to build relationships with the families. We are in regular contact through phone messaging, both in terms of logistics and family support when requested. We also make time to speak to caregivers who bring and collect their children.



"I have noticed a massive change in their confidence and ability to try new things and be brave. They learn how to share, interact and how to be kind about other people's feelings. The Play Rangers themselves are definitely a force to be reckoned with as they go above and beyond to make sure the kids are happy and always exploring new things and learning. They are happy to help on all levels especially if you have a child who is vulnerable and has low self esteem, they will definitely help bring out the best in your child. They are always on hand to help with any issues regarding your child and can always help by contacting other organisations if their services don't stretch that far. Organisations like this need to be top priority as it makes a huge difference to a child's life."

Parent



We have been building on existing relationships with our catchment schools as they are well placed to refer children to the project. We have run one session a week at lunchtimes at two local schools as a part of this. We are also building relationships with other local organisations such as GARAS (Gloucestershire Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers) and Young Minds (CAMHS) as they too are well placed to identify children who could benefit from the project.

Our regular reflective practice sessions with Toucan For Children help us explore relationships, techniques, difficulties and those issues that personally impact our play team.



The differences we're making (both big and small)

As a part of the evaluation process we drew up a relational 'Theory of Change' map, identifying outcomes, intermediate outcomes, activities and the values and assumptions at the heart of the Play2Nurture project (see full report).

The key focus has been on working to create the conditions for children to be able to play, knowing the benefits that flow from that. Benefits include the sheer pleasure of playing itself - we know this is more than an indulgence and has real benefits for children's health and wellbeing.

Working with small groups of children in a small, dedicated space (as well as outdoor settings) has allowed us to develop our therapeutic playwork, including with our therapy dog, Rafa. Some of the children really want to play one-to-one with the Play Rangers, and the extra staff and the trust within the team has allowed us to do that to great effect.

"We were a little anxious about a child who sometimes struggles to get along with other children and in his words 'I get very angry a lot'. His Mum flagged her concerns about how he might fit in and the Rangers not only wanted him to get a positive play experience but also make sure the other children were not impacted too much by his actions. I had a feeling that the child might like the playhouse as a little den he could retreat to and so it transpired. Pretty soon the two of us were deeply immersed in a game of zombies, me the zombie and him the human. He was very specific in my role and I used the 'stage aside' technique if I wasn't sure what to do. I was on a mission to eat human brains and as a zombie he told me that I had to be angry ... He directs the play ... Sometimes I'll break the rules and try and eat the dog's brains, which I'm not allowed to do."

Play Ranger



Safe Space and Trusting Relationships

We have worked to make sure the children feel safe in the space and can build trusting relationships with the Play Rangers. Many of the children have commented on how safe they feel there, for example:

“It’s a safe space and the Play Rangers actually understand you for once and they don’t judge you by just looking at you and telling you, saying bad things about you.”

Our critical cartography approach to evaluation has looked at mapping the space to see how it works in terms of meeting the identified outcomes. We have many maps, stories, play profiles and photos that show how the children value time and space to play. The children have been involved in the mapping, including using LED drawing tablets to draw what they value.



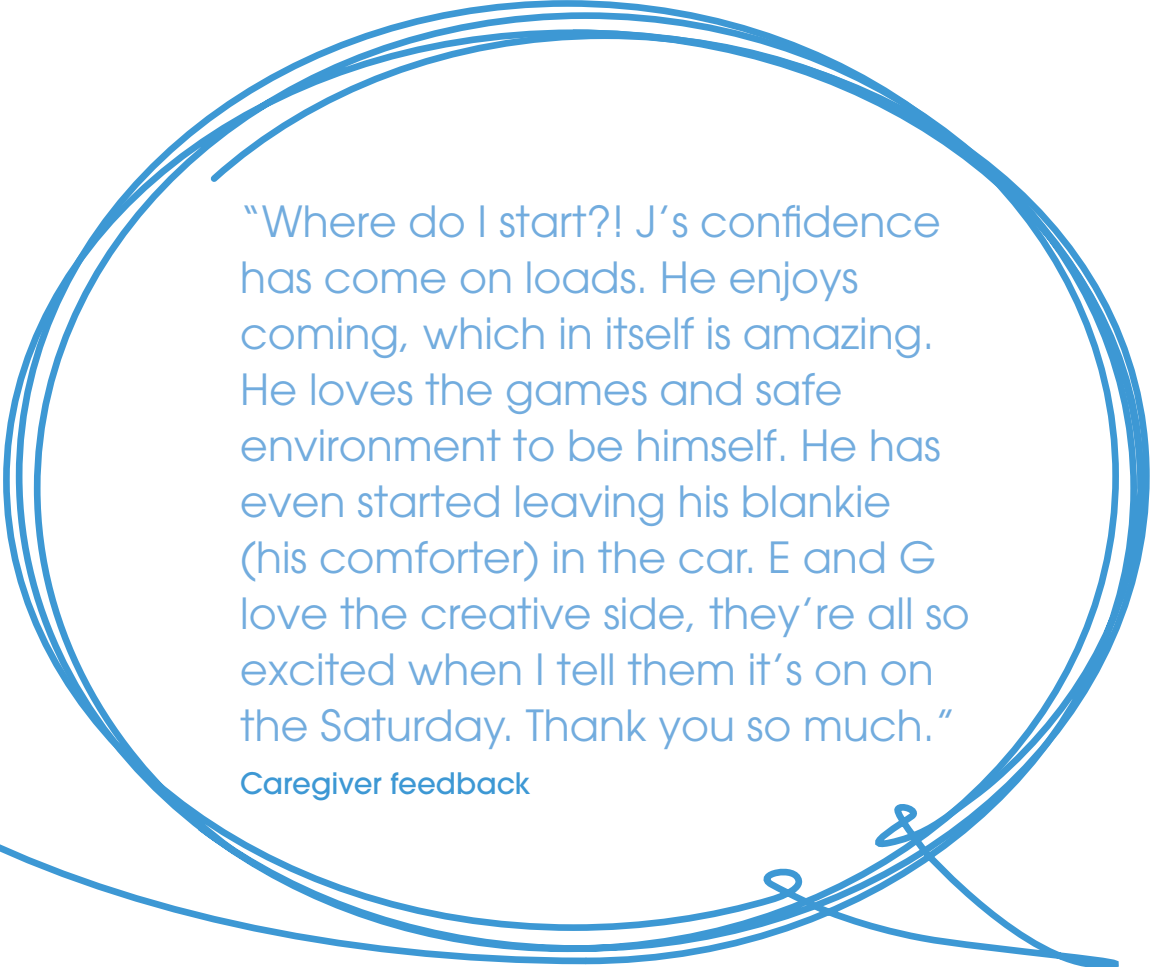
The children value being able to play, making friends, feeling safe, trying out new things, being able to get away from everyday stresses and hardships.

“Because, if you’ve lost someone you love, like if you lost someone and you feel really sad, and when you come to Play Rangers, you always forget about it. Yeah, you can forget about everything and if you can’t forget the Play Rangers can help you face your fears and they will ask you what’s wrong and you can tell them and then you can feel good again.”

Play2Nurture player

The Play Rangers’ mappings, stories, log sheets and case studies show that the children are physically active, they have contact with nature, they can play out emotions such as anger or fear within a safe frame held by the Play Rangers, and they can learn coping mechanisms and unlearn damaging response patterns.





“Where do I start?! J’s confidence has come on loads. He enjoys coming, which in itself is amazing. He loves the games and safe environment to be himself. He has even started leaving his blankie (his comforter) in the car. E and G love the creative side, they’re all so excited when I tell them it’s on on the Saturday. Thank you so much.”

Caregiver feedback

*The full report is packed full of stories and quotations like this.

What we’ve learned

The collaborative and cartographic approach to evaluation has helped us reflect on what and how we are doing. It has been really valuable to have proper funding to enable this. We have also valued our reflective practice sessions with Toucan for Children. We are beginning to develop a clearer appreciation of the difference between playworking therapeutically with a small group of children and doing community-based play ranger sessions with high numbers of children. We have also learned specifically from the successes and challenges of the first year.

What’s gone well

“Play, play and more play” (Play Ranger). The play sessions across the three diverse spaces have worked really well. We have been able to work responsively and in a nurturing way with the challenges that children living with hardship and/or trauma can sometimes present. We have developed our ability to pay attention to what can make things better for the children and working to provide that, whether that is one-to-one playing or specific resources (such as small spaces). Despite the challenges faced by the children, we found it really easy to identify strengths for every child and have worked to support and develop those strengths and interests.



Part of the success of the play sessions is 'the vibe'. The cartographic documentation, feedback from children and their caregivers, and the log sheets show that the children feel safe (emotionally and physically), that they can be themselves, that the Play Rangers really listen to them. Children want to come to the sessions. There are constant, endless and ever evolving opportunities for adventure, friendship and fun. Relationships are key, with the Play Rangers, Rafa the therapy dog, and other children.



The delivery pattern is also working well, with regular after school sessions, Saturday sessions and holiday sessions.

Moving one of the after school sessions to the local park was an excellent decision. The park is at the heart of the community and running regular sessions there has been positive both in terms of benefits to the Play2Nurture children and working with children and families from the local community. Equally, it was the right decision to move the Tuesday sessions back to The Play Sanctuary in the darker months following reports of serious antisocial behaviour in the park. The Saturday sessions suited some of the Muslim children better, as they attended the Madrasa during the week after school. The holiday sessions provided an opportunity for children to continue to benefit once their term of after school sessions was over. The lunchtime sessions at Widden Primary School and St Pauls C of E Primary School have also been successful both in terms of what they offer the children and also in terms of building relationships with the school and securing referrals. In January, these sessions will move to a different school (St James' C of E Junior School) with children from that school attending the Thursday session, being picked up and dropped home afterwards because of its location.



As a team we have worked to our diverse strengths, bringing different skills and personalities to the sessions. The evaluation approach, including mapping and play profiling, has supported us to reflect, discuss and develop further our skills, knowledge and understanding of play, particularly in the intense context of Play Sanctuary sessions.





We have also worked successfully to support parents and caregivers in tough times and there is ample evidence to show how we have developed trust in these relationships. Sharing positive moments with parents and caregivers has been valued, although we are careful to maintain the focus on children themselves.



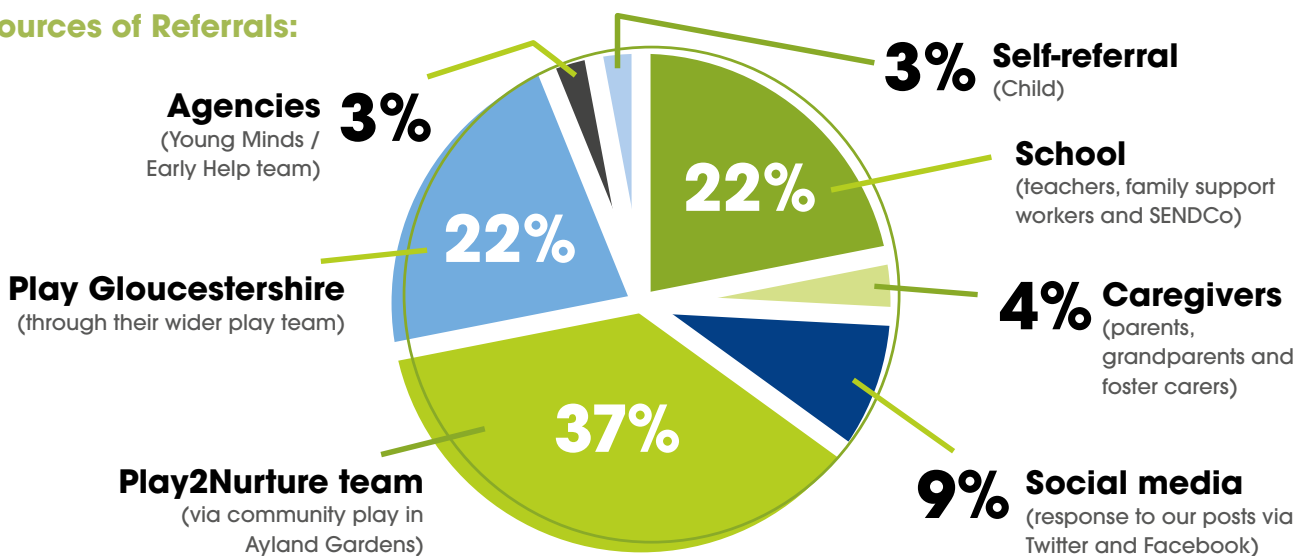
Challenges faced:

Access: The early realisation just how difficult it was for some caregivers to get their children to sessions and to pick them up was crucial, and the team responded quickly to this, putting in place systems for picking children up from schools and dropping them home after the session. In addition, they were successful in obtaining funding for a new e-transporter.

Endings: Group endings have been difficult. This is partly because the Play Rangers are not used to having to stop working with specific children (“it feels like play rationing”, said one Play Ranger), and partly because it is clear that some of the children still need the extra play boost that Play2Nurture offers because of the trauma or hardships they are still facing. Running holiday sessions and community-based sessions have to some extent mitigated the problem of the short time that children have to benefit from the term-time Play2Nurture sessions. For some children, particularly, endings are still difficult.

Referrals: Despite interest in and support for the project, it has often been difficult for this to translate into formal referrals with the required paperwork. The team has worked both to broaden routes into the project (including self-referral and community referrals) and to develop relationships with schools and other organisations well placed to refer children.

Sources of Referrals:





Looking forward to year 2

We have made several changes throughout the year (described above). Looking forward to year 2, we will continue to develop our approach to referrals, including working with other organisations.

We will reflect on the issue of 'endings' and the emergent issue of the growing size of the Play2Nurture 'family' and how many children can be effectively catered for during holiday sessions.

We have planned a training day for our Young Volunteers to provide a little more structure around their role. They are keen to get more involved, with many aspiring to become Play Rangers when they are older:

"The one thing I know for sure is by the time I turn 16, I want to become a Play Ranger Apprentice and like work here fully. It's three years 'til then. I can't wait."

Girl, 13



Staff training and development is planned, including through bringing more Rangers into the evaluation sessions and through the project manager starting her Postgraduate Certificate in Therapeutic Play Skills with Leeds Beckett University.

We will continue to develop our critical cartography approach to evaluation.

We will work on broadening and deepening professional relationships and networks, drawing more potential stakeholders (and statutory funders) into the project as a step towards sustainability.

“When I’m here I feel calm. Basically this is like a little club where I have everybody I love here and I just feel really calm because I know that I have people I know here and I know that I’m actually safe instead of worrying about something.”

Play2Nurture player

Report by Dr Wendy Russell* with Pip Levett, Charlie Marsh, Ellie Rowles, Jenni Wilson, and Jasmin Berry. Thanks to all who contributed to the evaluation process, including the children.

Copies of the full evaluation report available from
pip@playgloucestershire.org.uk

*Dr Wendy Russell is a visiting fellow at the University of Gloucestershire, specialist in play and playwork and our external evaluator.



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