



Summary Report

The Well-being benefits of playing at Fort Apache, Torbay



Good from Woods research project

With Exploring Nature Play and Play Torbay

Naomi Wright

October 2013

Good From Woods Well-being benefits and indicators results

theme (total)	Indicator	Indicator total
Psychological (79)	Being in control	21
	Competent and seen by others to be competent	6
	Energetic,	2
	Purposeful	20
	Developing oneself	13
	Connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook	12
	Secure with personal limitations	5
Emotional (42)	Positive emotions and moods	25
	Absence of negative emotions and moods,	4
	Feeling even tempered,	3
	Relaxed	2
	Optimistic about the present, optimistic about the future.	8
Social (28)	Being confident	4
	Accepted, safe and supported within and through social relationships,	22
	Supporting others through social relationships	2
Physical (15)	Physical health,	3
	Confidence in and enjoyment of physical activity	12
Biophilic -(30)	Closeness to the natural world	14
	Being engaged in a relationship with nature	16
Cultural/creative – connection with place * (11)	Imaginative and creative expression of place.	7
	Inspired by the place and with the whole self, a sense of belonging	4
Self-healing * (3)	Expressing a self-prescription of coming to the place to feel better (less angry, less worried, less hurt).	3

* Additional suggested themes from the research at Fort Apache



The project: Well-being benefits of play at Fort Apache

The organisation: Exploring Nature Play Project, Play England and Play Torbay

The project researcher: Naomi Wright artist researcher and volunteer for the Exploring Nature Play project

Participant Group: Children and adults working and playing at Fort Apache, and other stakeholders from the local community

Number taking part: 52 in total plus others in general observations.

Activity: Saturday morning play sessions and play events held at Fort Apache over a period of 12 months, August 2012 – August 2013-10-01

Top messages:

- Let the **children continue to lead the play activity in the woodland**, and be free to choose what they do. The benefits are clearly shown in terms of their wellbeing. As one of the stakeholders said *'you can feel that the place belongs to children.'*
- The **psychological benefits** (see page 2) of this type of activity within the woodland appear to be huge. Promote play near **trees and their spaces which provide the interesting and varied places** necessary for this free nature play. Recognise the freedom and permissions that the play workers and volunteers give the children and young people to **be in control, purposeful and develop themselves.**
- Create a **one size fits all consent and research process** with Play Torbay, so that parents only have to sign once and the research can make the most of opportunities that present themselves within the open woodland environment. This will make it easier to research and reach the **needs of more disadvantaged** children and young people who lead particularly complicated lives. Develop a plan for ongoing research, perhaps in **collaboration with academic institutes or other organisations**, working with children (FUNK), volunteers, researchers, and artists who can observe from the edge of activity and step in when required.



Background

Exploring Nature Play is a 3 year lottery funded project hosted by Play England, set up to investigate different ways of increasing understanding of nature through play with children. Fort Apache in Torquay is one of three sites in England that is hosting one part time member of staff to deliver this project. This Good From Woods research provided an opportunity to study the existing activity in the woodland and the significance of nature in the play.

Play England is an organisation within the National Children's Bureau that works for all children and young people to have freedom and space to play throughout childhood.

Fort Apache is managed by Play Torbay which provides free play and adventures in partnership with other organisations for all children and young people in Torbay. The organisation is lead by the children's expressed needs.

Play Torbay employs a community development worker and play workers who work at the woodland twice a week, and more in the summer holidays. On a typical play session there are 4 play workers and 2 or 3 volunteers, and up to 50 children and young people taking part.

Research focus

Three main aims of the research were as follows:

- To find out more about any wellbeing benefits gained by the children and young people from their play in Fort Apache woodland adventure playground.
- To help clarify whether or how the natural environment, the activities, the place or the social elements contributed to the wellbeing of children and young people playing at Fort Apache.
- To research how best to carry out ongoing action-research in an open and accessible play woodland site such as Fort Apache.

Context

Fort Apache is Play Torbay's only wooded, 'wild' and publically accessible adventure playground. It is surrounded by housing estates and grows on the site of an old tip.

Fort Apache's ethos embraces free play, in which the children and young people come and go as they please, there is no payment and they guide the play activity supported by the play workers and volunteers employed on site.

Fort Apache is within an area in the top 10% of multiple deprivation in England. Many of the local children come from homes with generational unemployment, drug dependency, and mental illness. Many of the local children are carers or have additional needs – not as noticeable whilst playing as they may be at school or in a "controlled" situation. Often, the children come from single parent families, families where more than one generation lives together, fostered children and extended



families co-habit.

Commonly there are between 40 and 50 children attending the sessions, the numbers for each session varies according to the time of year and family needs.

The play on offer includes any form of nature play throughout the woods (tree climbing, den building, mud sliding), provision of nets or ropes, lighting a fire and cooking. Organised activities might include woodwork, modelling clay and tree planting. The children's interests lead all activities and requests with additional advice from FUNK, the young advisory group for play in the whole of Torbay.

Expectations

The stakeholders expected and hoped to find out that the children and young people have fun and are happy at Fort Apache. They also expected elements of learning, expanding horizons and sharing of adventures.

With reference to their own childhood experience of play there was a hope that children and young people would develop a greater understanding of nature and benefit from being outdoors, such as being physically and mentally stronger.

These stakeholder's memories of play, indicated to the researcher an expectation that the children need to create their own memories of, or nurture, the culture of this 'wild' and 'natural' woodland.

Some of the stakeholders had become friends through volunteering at Fort Apache. There was an expectation that children, young people and themselves with a wide range of ages, would all benefit together.

The hope was that the children and young people spend most time freely playing, in the wilder areas. They also expected that the children and young people appreciated time with volunteers and staff, who were never judgemental and allowed them freedoms they don't get elsewhere.

Methods used

A range of different research methodologies were used:

- Conversational Drift – Letting the child lead the conversation or activity
- Interview – one to one across a table
- Discussion Group – around the fire pit or under the trees
- Joining in other happenings – display table and conversations at other organisation's activities
- Working alongside other groups – such as FUNK, encouraging them to want to help
- Leading and setting up events – such as soup and tea at lunch time chats
- Envisioning – Creating prints and maps of Fort Apache
- Fun Games – developing games for Fort Apache
- Observational Drawing – sketches and on photographs of movement and place
- Photographs – a range taken throughout the year
- Videos – some taken by the children
- Interventions and installations – activities in tree houses



- Questionnaire – an electronic Survey Monkey questionnaire

As an artist, the researcher explored the ideas of play as art as life and is part of the living process.

The most successful of these methodologies were those carried out in the same spirit of the place, free, open-ended and child lead.

Children come and go as they please and the methodology for the action research had to be flexible and stretch according to their needs and interests. In addition some the methods tried worked better than others – generally paper based and electronic questionnaires and games worked less well. **Children and adults at Fort Apache like to do things outdoors**, not read things.

Results

There were clear benefits from playing in Fort Apache woodland. Positive emotions and moods (25), Being in control (21), and being safe and supported within a group (20) were the most commonly referred to indicators. The psychological was the most significant of all of them.

During the 12 months there were no observed problems caused to the participants through the playing in Fort Apache. Incidents were never reflected in the evidence given. They always related to personal issues of the child or children, not the activity in the woodland.

Both children and stakeholders referred to the open and free nature of the space, as well as the variety of trees and slopes and vegetated surfaces within it. This environment and the fact that children are given a broad permission to play provided the following range of benefits:

Psychological

This was the most regularly attributed theme, and within this **'being in control'**, **'purposeful'** and **'developing oneself'** were the most common indicators.

Children often described being in control of their space in a den, or tree house, or while hiding in vegetation. They used these moments to escape their family, or their home, a time to be themselves, alone, find some peace.

'Q: So that's (pointing at the hidden treasures) why you needed a code from me so I could come into your space here that you have made'

C6: It gives me a homey feeling

They also used these self discovered spaces to play games with their friends that lead to an expression of a similar belief, being purposeful. The mixed age range was important too, young people playing with smaller children, the children being with the adults different from their family and school.

C4: There's like no particular place really, it's just like every part of it is special cos like when kids come here.....

Q: Yeah.

C4: They literally feel welcomed, they literally feel like they can, they wake up in the morning and have a smile on their face and say yeah I'm going to Fort Apache I can do anything I want, no one can stop me.



Emotional

Nearly everyone expressed a **positive emotion or mood, the most common indicator referred to**. It was easy to take this for granted. All sorts of places were referred to when talking about these feelings such as dens, nest area where activities happen, fire pit and cooking area.

Q: Oh right, yeah. and how do you feel when you are in your dens?

C: Happy.

C3: it's all good.

Q: Yeah?

C3: Everything's perfect here, it's always good fun; you can always find something to do.

C13: if Fort Apache wasn't a little bit dangerous it wouldn't be that fun.

Q: And why would that be?

C13: Because there's some mountains and they're dangerous but they're really fun to climb up.

Contributing factors were lots of things to do, games to play and places to explore, sticks to play with, some risk, spaces to relax, not being tired (like they are getting up for school).

Being **even tempered, optimistic and relaxed** was also significant, often when the children were on their own.

Social

The third most commonly used indicator was being **accepted, safe and supported within and through social relationships**. Children and stakeholders often referred to the social side of the experience of playing at Fort Apache. The mix of children and adults was important, as was having a range of places for them to meet, to socialise and to make decisions about what to do next. Woodland environments always have a range of different spaces.

Q: Oh, so you sort of came and found it here?

C3 Yeah.

Q: And why did you decide that you wanted to play here?

C3 Because everyone was nice here, you had good things to do and yeah

In describing 'War Games' and 'Indians' at Fort Apache :

Q: and how many children were involved in that?

C2 Loads.

C14 about.....

C2 Nearly the whole of Fort apache.

There are times when children play in large groups, and others when they are on their own and in



small groups. Fort Apache allows for this to happen naturally.

Physical

The evidence gathered through map making and photographs show an immense amount of physical activity and movement all over the site, as well as learning to work with their hands woodworking.

Confidence and enjoyment of physical activity was the most important indicator. People referred to feeling refreshed and enjoying the fresh air, tiring themselves out too.

C10 The best thing... it's full of good sites and, some of the sites, I practice my moves

Q: You practice your what?

C10 My moves

Q: Your moves. What are your moves?

C10 My fighting

On talking about the 'man-hunt' game:

Q: Do you think, do you think here's a good place for games like that?

C14 Yeah.

Q: Why's that then?

C2 Cos there's loads of places to hide and.....

This was attributed to the whole of Fort Apache and also the surrounding streets and playing field.

Biophilic

The connection with nature came through strongly, **being engaged in a relationship with nature coming 4th out of 22 indicators**. The children noticed the smallest details in the shape and structure of the trees, whether it was for creatures or for their use as bed, house, den, climbing frame, shelter. They would express their closeness to nature in relation to dens, the wilder areas, on the edge of the woods. They also referred to a familiarity of the different seasons. They enjoyed opportunities to learn about the natural world too.

D: Is that a narrow leaf?

C10 Narrow leaf? No cos it goes out then in.

Q: Mmm. Well what about this one there, would you say that was a narrow leaf?

C10 No.

Q: Yeah, there's a little ledge that's like a round.....

C18 Chair.

Q: Chair. Exactly, it's just like a chair and it's somehow, it just fits in just right doesn't it? When did you find this?

C3: Yeah cos in the fields you haven't got that choice – you can't make a fire in the field, one it'll spread, two its grass and three it's been raining for quite a while.....



Creative/cultural (a new theme for this research at Fort Apache)

Children referred to things they imagined, stories, daydreams, adventures, memories, the atmosphere of the place, a general connection with the place with a sense of belonging that wasn't easily placed within the other categories of .

Children expressed a creative/cultural/imaginative that may indicate a more holistic and innate connection with the place. A linking with their kith or homeland, The enjoyment of the cooking activity over the fire may also be linked to this .

This more holistic was connected to feeling safe, relaxed, purposeful, close to the place, and was often in particular spaces that the children felt like they had control over.

The indicator most referred to was the **imaginative, creative expression of place, giving this sense of belonging.**

Q: So what's he doing now?

C6: He's doing a bit of sleep talking and it's a log and there was sleep talking and you don't want to disturb his natural behaviour.

Q: So how does it make you feel when you come and find these things again?

C10: I have a vision or a flashback and I can see them in their life,

Q: Who's your friend? He's just talking to – down the tunnel – what does he do this friend?

C10: He kind of looks after my base at night and he does a very good job and he.....

Q: Does he? Has he got a name?

C10: I haven't given him one yet.

Reflections

To an adult passing through Fort Apache it may not appear that special – a scrubby area of ordinary woodland, some rubbish not far below the surface, new rubbish in places, steep muddy bald slopes, they might judge it as a bit of a scruffy forgotten patch of wood. To those children that live nearby, **it is the playground of their lives for every day, it is the nature close to where they live.** When the play workers and volunteers are on site, they enable even more adventurous play, the whole place buzzes with a mixture of contentment and excitement.

The children and young people get **permissions and freedom to express their place in it through play**, connect with it's wild and jungliness, to get mucky, to be themselves that they might not get at home.

The **self prescription**, described by the children, of a little piece of fort apache play to calm down, to feel peaceful, to feel better is interesting. *Q: Do you come here quite often?*

C10 Yeah. I come here to calm down

Q: Oh! Why do you need to calm down?

C10: Because I can get really angry. I can get really angry really easily. And it's not very nice



To the adults involved there is an overwhelming feeling of wellbeing for themselves working in Fort Apache. The place has a unique and magic quality to all those I spoke to, because it is free, unfenced, open and natural, relaxed. The significance of this feeling passed on to the children and the way they play should not be underestimated.

A: There's a feeling up there that isn't there – it does stay there but it's not strong

Q: What when they're not there?

A: It's a feeling of ease, I can't describe the feeling really, it's ease, yeah, because now – as I say the children have put their stamp on it]

Q: Mmm

A: And they've – its – I don't know, it shouts out that this place belongs to children.

Action points

Research.

1. Create a **one size fits all consent and research process** with Play Torbay, so that parents only have to sign once. The research can then make the most of opportunities that present themselves within the open woodland environment. This will make it easier to research and reach the **needs of more disadvantaged** children and young people who lead particularly complicated lives.
2. Develop a plan for ongoing research, perhaps in **collaboration with academic institutes or other organisations**, working with children (FUNK), volunteers, researchers, artists who can observe from the edge of activity and step in when required, and encourage different thinking.
3. Try out **different methodologies** (make them playful) and be prepared to go with the flow (and fail) in such open and free environments. It does not work like inside a classroom, this sort of research takes time and has involved volunteering and paid work.
4. Other areas to research include the self- prescription, the benefits to volunteers and staff, creative wellbeing indicators.

Children's and adult's Play

5. Let the **children continue to lead**, as one of the stakeholders said; 'you can feel that the place belongs to children.'
6. The **psychological benefits** (see page 2) of this type of activity within the woodland appear to be huge. Promote play near **trees and their spaces which provide the interesting and varied places** necessary for this free nature play. Recognise the freedom and permissions that the play workers and volunteers give the children and young people to **be in control, purposeful and develop themselves**.
7. Recognise the **benefits to the adults working or volunteering** on activities with children in woodland, the happier they are the more they support the place and the children.
8. The fact that it has open free access means that the **children continue to play after the 'play work'** sessions. The confidence and competence and connection with the woods gained during this time could be explored further..
10. Put on more events that **create memories and encourage families** to engage with Fort Apache, while recognising that these families are complicated..
11. Provide more **free and improvised creative activities** such as playing music, dressing up, installations and cooking.



Summary of findings

Rank (most reported out of 22 indicators)	Wellbeing outcome and indicators	Associated factors
1	Emotional , positive feelings and emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lots to do, lots of adventures, activities • The fire pit, the nest are comforting places • The dens provide space to calm down.
2	Psychological , Being in control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given the freedom and permission to play how they like. Lots of natural places to hide and be themselves. • Supported through self-development – whether activity based or just providing a place to gather and talk. • Self-prescription of play at fort apache to make themselves feel better.
3	Social , Accepted, safe and supported within and through social relationships,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The mixture of ages present – adults to little children. • Places to gather and make friends • The cooking and the eating lunch together. • The workshops and woodworking activities
3	Psychological , being purposeful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children lead the play • Loose materials to enable that play – ropes, nets, woodland materials, sticks etc • Workshops, in the nest
4	Biophilic , being engaged in a relationship with nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allowed to go out of sight, explore and climb trees. • The woodland provides the variety of vegetation and surfaces to get a great understanding of the form and function of the trees, a stronger awareness of nature. • Opportunities to learn more about nature
5.	Biophilic , being close to nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As above • Allowed to get mucky and explore. • Activities that allow physical and mental immersion in nature.
6.	Physical , confidence in, and enjoyment of physical activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The nature of the environment • Making things – woodwork, design and build • The permission to roam from parents and play workers
7.	Creative/cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The wooded, free and open place engenders creative and imaginative play • The freedom to get close to it and belong in a holistic sense • Provision of loose parts • Opportunities to express imaginative play through the arts • The cooking

Contact details:

Naomi Wright

Artist, researcher, facilitator, play worker.....

naomioutdoorplay@gmail.com

07807 900843



Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

