

CREATIVE APPROACHES TO FAMILY LEARNING

TEN KEY CONCEPTS



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CREATIVE
TOGETHER

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Introduction: Artworks

Creative Together was a four year programme delivered by Artworks and funded by a Big Lottery Family Learning Grant. Working across four areas of West Yorkshire (Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees and Leeds) the programme used a range of creative techniques to help parents and carers to enjoy learning together.

The programme worked with many families, some of whom had very diverse and challenging backgrounds – including physical and learning disabilities, families with a child at risk of exclusion and people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, many of whom did not have English as their first language.

As the programme developed it became possible to identify the techniques that we found most effective, and it became apparent relatively early in the project that storytelling helped families to work well together. Furthermore, when combined with other art forms such as animation and film it became more appealing to many parents and carers, especially fathers (who had previously been more difficult to engage).

Having overachieved its outputs it was possible for the programme's approach to become even more innovative, and explorative in the way in which it was delivered. There was also a strong sense that there should be an emphasis on sustainability, ensuring that the learning was embedded within artists and partner organisations.

At the start of the Creative Together programme Artworks commissioned Anni Raw to act as an external evaluator and she has worked closely with Artworks, its artists and practitioners to examine the different approaches used in the programme. Following this work Anni has helped to design and deliver training to help artists and support workers to gain a deeper understanding of how and why specific ways of working are particularly effective.

Introduction: by the author

The following selection of activities and approaches highlights some of the excellent moments from the Creative Together programme. The collection consists of vignettes from observations by the programme evaluator, with some artists' descriptions of activities, and analysis of why each approach was particularly effective in a creative family learning initiative.

The collection contains ten devices and approaches, some highlighting an important moment captured that has some wider applicability, some describing a particular activity, and others emphasising the value of working simply, and of the person-centred nature of the work. The first two highlight the importance of some fundamental elements of the work: imaginative inspiration, and social interaction. The next – the use of 'storytelling' as a device – was a strategy adopted by the Creative Together team, and underpinned project delivery across the programme beyond year two. These are followed by two rich descriptions: how to work safely with emotions, and how to unlock playfulness. A related example then describes a project moment demonstrating the importance within family projects of following the child into their own world, and taking the child's creative lead. We then focus on the use of food, and on the value of modelling behaviours in parenting projects – especially permission to experiment creatively and how to learn from failed experiments. The collection concludes with two examples of approaches to closing and ending – the value of closing rituals, and the importance of ending positively, and with proper ceremony.

Every project situation and every group is unique, and the particular conditions in which each of these examples was observed will never be repeated. However we hope that the descriptions offer inspiration as well as some insight, for how to work creatively with families, especially families under pressure.

Anni Raw (Creative Together Evaluator)

Simple, ordinary materials

Several Creative Together artists chose to work with some very accessible materials, for example leaves and natural objects collected from outside, or recycled materials sourced from any household, such as copper piping, or lentils, seeds or other dried foods. These were used for many different making activities, and this approach is recommended as long as it doesn't lower the quality of the experience for participants. There is a definite positive impact from using high quality materials, to give the message that participants' work is highly valued. However in the case of this family learning project, using accessible materials has the advantage that parents can very quickly feel in control of the techniques they learn, and empowered to continue trying creative activities at home.

The best approach is to use a mixture of simple materials, in a highly stimulating activity, such as described in the example opposite. The key here is that the activity stimulates the imagination, and promotes imaginative, playful use of simple materials. In this case, for example, the result was one participant spending considerable time at home with his own camera, building his own sets and animating some excellent short films, using what he had around him. He now wants a career in animation.

Imagination creating a miniature world

The process of constructing the set for the animated scene is fascinating. A large box is retrieved from a back room behind the school kitchen, and from it spill numerous oddments which to me look like the leftover remnants of an outdoor jumble sale: several large pieces of rough-cut cloth of different colours and textures, pieces of moss, twigs, a box of small animal figures, two half-formed miniature plasticine figures – one of a dog and one a person – and a cardboard model hut with dry mud glued to the roof. This rough paraphernalia contrasts sharply with the high-tech camera and professional lighting equipment being set up on tripods, focusing on a small table. Bryan Tweddle (artist) helps two of the boys organise cloth, moss and twigs (crumpled cloth backdrop strewn with bits of outdoor woodland materials, precariously balanced, and a tiny twig campfire constructed centrally, with what look like orange and red plasticine worms protruding through the twigs.) Abdul is at the camera, and meticulously focuses the lens on the ramshackle scene, clicking one shot – meanwhile Imran darts a hand in and bends the plasticine worms very slightly. Another click. Imran darts in again, another slight tweak: another shot. The stop-frame scene is unfolding before my eyes, these are the flames of a flickering campfire! The earnestness with which the group creates a complete imaginary world from ad hoc bits and pieces here in this large, empty school dining hall is impressive. I am completely drawn in. Each team member is holding the map of the agreed storyline in their mind's eye, and playing their role in helping the story proceed.

(Stop-frame animation project observation)

Making and chatting

An approach taken less often within Creative Together, but which was valuable and successful in generating a sense of community and collective purpose when chosen, was to make a single collective piece of work over several weeks, involving many hands on deck.

Here it is important to move beyond initiating an on-going, repetitive activity that might gradually lose people's interest. It's about inspiring participants to contribute to a piece of artwork which they all value, and want to see completed. Facilitating an activity that is absorbing enough to engage participants for long stretches, but which is simple enough to allow people to chat while involved, is an expert judgement.

In the example opposite there are several useful details. The artist has set up the mosaic activity so that there are 'quick wins' – small sections can be completed before interest is lost, and each completed section is satisfying in itself. Together, all parts gradually create a very beautiful larger piece, which sustains motivation over several weeks. The artist has ensured the quality of the final piece by guiding the design, but leaving flexibility to accommodate participants' own additions – important for people to feel that the work is their own. The combination of structure and freedom creates a positive atmosphere, and the task itself is simple enough to perform whilst chatting and laughing. Through becoming collectively involved in creating the piece, participants' social interaction increases.

NB: Extreme care is needed if using this activity in groups with small children, as the glass cutting produces splinters, the task is very fiddly, and very young children can become bored by the length of time involved in the same activity.

Making and chatting: collective mosaic making

As families arrive there's fun in the room. The mood is easy, and the newcomers sit down, chatting with others, ready to start cutting and sticking coloured glass tiles, to help complete the mosaic. I sit down at a table to help out with a border section. The African woman next to me is friendly, but absorbed. Opposite me, the mother of the Korean family settles busily into completing her border piece: a car, which she shows me, smiling. It's meticulous work. At the other end of the table the Middle Eastern family I met last time continue working and laughing. Another woman sits beside me. She is calm and friendly, and while we chat she tells me she is from The Sudan. I ask her advice about the section I am working on, and we talk about children, because her son is now on her lap, tired out. She tells me mosaicing is very relaxing and very involving – "you can't stop doing it!" she laughs. We agree that it's easy to chat to people while doing the mosaic.

The whole piece depicts the church hall and says 'WELCOME' – letters decorated with buildings, flowers, gardens insects and small animals. It's very beautiful, and growing ever more intricate. As I sit working on a garden and pathway, elsewhere a worm appears, followed by two ladybirds to accompany the bumblebee. These spontaneous additions are the most exciting parts, where people are adding their own creative mark. As the session draws to a close, artist Frances Taylor very efficiently lays out the whole mosaic for people to see, and so that she can measure it. People mill around it, gently touching tiles with an affectionate finger, standing back to take it all in, taking photos. Now it's all hands on deck to tidy the room.

(Mosaic project observation)

Storytelling: working with narratives

From early on in the Creative Together programme the usefulness of 'storytelling' began to emerge, as a valuable mechanism or framework for exploring perspectives, or expressing experiences. Artworks made 'storytelling' the central shared characteristic of Creative Together projects, with the theme interpreted widely. Approaches included projects that worked directly with storytelling, such as puppetry to tell personal stories, stories from local community history to form a theme for a community event, or devising and creating a story using stop-frame animation. Other projects worked with storytelling in the sense of keeping a project journal to record the story of the project, or using personal journals to maintain a reflective focus on a family's story of learning together.

The example opposite shows the device used as a way of encouraging a family group to reflect on other people's lives and experiences, by building up photographic stories, supported by research. In this description 'storytelling' runs through the project on several levels: each participant is creating a photographic storyboard; the group uses single portraits of individuals or groups of Bradford citizens to suggest personal stories; and comments and perspectives are also gathered from a range of community members to build a composite story of Bradford life. This project therefore uses photographic devices as a lens for focussing in on, and weaving together, different narratives.

A story told in pictures

Jonathan Turner (photographic artist) projects El's storyboard pictures onto the large screen as we sit in the gallery room. As each photograph comes up there is general curiosity and appreciation from everybody. The pictures are intriguing, using miniature plastic 'duplo'-figures, and constructing the set for each scene by using tricks of perspective to recreate the everyday surroundings of the main character, in his 'day in the life'. El has chosen to construct a day in the life of a commuting office worker; his brother has chosen to focus on a comic strip style storyboard, of a character who ends up homeless.

Jonathan then shares some of his own intriguing and quirky photo portraits of ordinary residents in their home surroundings, showing how a single picture can also draw the viewer in, and how it can tell multiple stories.

After discussing the portraits we all set off outside, with the aim of taking street portraits of people in Centenary Square, and conducting interviews about their experiences of living in Bradford.

The following week we are back in the gallery, talking about planning an interactive workshop for Bradford community members, to be hosted and facilitated by the project participants. This twist is all about beginning to build a collective, multi-layered narrative about life in Bradford, so that the current participants integrate, into their exhibition concept, ways to capture and project the diverse stories that other people will bring.

(Evaluator notes, photographic story project)

Working with feelings

When working with families at times of stress or crisis, practitioners need strengths in emotional intelligence and sensitivity, as well as using creative approaches that can channel or work with some raw feelings, safely. Any art form can be excellent for working with feelings. The key to good practice in this work lies in two factors: the acute sensitivity, facilitation and communication skills of the practitioners, and the clarity and quality of the activity.

In some creative work with vulnerable families, practitioners in Creative Together chose to give participants the chance to take a break from their raw feelings by becoming involved in very absorbing creative activities, such as withy and tissue lantern making, or mosaicing. However there was excellent practice in working more directly with difficult emotions, with both children and parents, in a project for families suffering from bereavement. Writer Siobhan Mac Mahon created the exercise opposite, which she says was inspired by Angela Stoner in 'Writing Works'. Introducing the activity to parents and children in the project, she used stones and shells as inspiration to encourage participants to write poems individually.

This is a simple but powerful activity, and has the potential to unlock strong or perhaps even frightening feelings for some people. The keys to its success, in this case encouraging the families to produce some very beautiful, moving poetry that was very precious to them, lay in Siobhan's calm and sensitive facilitation, taking time and care; and the way in which the structure of the poem enabled people to imagine their feelings transferred to, and contained safely within, a beautiful object, outside of themselves.

Magical talking stones

A table is spread with a beautiful cloth, and the stones and shells are laid out on the cloth. The artist invites everyone to pick a stone, saying 'these stones can speak to you – listen to what they have to say. Hold your stone, feel it, and imagine it is talking to you, telling you its story.' Each participant takes time to choose a stone, gem or shell. When they have it in their hands the artist asks them to tell the stone's story, using sentences beginning with 'I am...'

Some guiding questions and some examples help people to begin writing their poem:

What colour are you? *(For example: Deep red like fire, iridescent, the blues and greens of the sea...)*

What shape are you? *(I am rough and jagged, I am tiny, smooth, soft, I am curved with secrets, I am cold and eternal...)*

What do you feel like? *(Smooth, cool, heavy...)*

How old are you? *(I come from the time before man, I am millions of years old, I am older than memory...)*

Where do you come from? *(I come from the bottom of the ocean floor, I come from the bottom of a holy well, I come from the silence of a dark forest...)*

What can you protect me from? *(I will protect you from... fear, loneliness, despair, demons...)*

Do you have a secret? A wish? *(I wish I could be discovered and set free, I could find my way home, I could stay by the sea forever...)*

What special / magical quality lies hidden within you? *(At the heart of me lies... Courage, hope, kindness, wisdom...)*

People edit or add to their poems, and then read them out if they wish.

Fun and playfulness: permission to play together

Humour and playfulness are important tools in Creative Together artists' kit. Humour was used to build a friendly atmosphere, to break down barriers and connect – building trust, to lighten people's mood sometimes, and even, in the form of gentle teasing, to create a kind of conspiratorial allegiance between artists and group.

As well as joking and humour, some projects focussed on play itself, and the energy and unique shared experiences that play can unlock. Sometimes play can even be subversive – undercutting fears and rules to allow adults and children some rare shared experiences. The example described below and opposite was with a group of mothers from a Pakistani community nursery project: mums and small children working creatively with artists in an art gallery space.

The artists encouraged these mums to subvert their cautiousness about behaviour norms, and hesitancy to take their own space in the lofty cultural environment of an art gallery, by playing: creating a playground in the space. It was the relationship built up between artists and participants, creating a comfortable and light-hearted learning environment, that enabled these mums to take the 'plunge' to play, in public!

The third room in the gallery is where the group had spent the previous session, with their children. They had been tearing up paper, until they'd made a huge pile on the floor of the gallery, and then swimming in it, in front of the large Hockney 'coloured compressed paper pulp' piece 'Le Plongeur' (The Diver). The mums' faces are alive now with the memory of such fun and such irreverence – in an art gallery! Lou (arts practitioner) says "we made a lot of noise didn't we?"... "We've still got the paper you know!" she confides later, laughing.

(Gallery project observation)

Playing together in a gallery space

Artist Lou Sumray writes:

'The Plongeur' by Hockney surprises people because it's not a painting but a paper pulp picture, so when I give permission in the Gallery, in front of the Hockney, to tear up massive bits of paper (all from scrap) I'm looking at lots of elements:

The energy that the picture depicts – of someone swimming, making a splash and then swimming underwater – disturbing the otherwise still water on a hot day;

Permission to tear paper – the satisfaction, the slight naughtiness, the lovely noise;

To make a harmless mess in a Gallery – no damage done;

To mimic the beginning of the process that Hockney would have had to go through in order to create the piece – create paper pulp;

Love of swimming – everybody can safely swim through paper;

My love of photos of seeing things thrown into the air and randomly floating down;

The joy of play to be coaxed out of us adults;

To start with something that may appear destructive, but to then go on to use the torn bits to create a collage that has the same energy, randomness that we can build up, to hang on the wall;

The chance for children and parents to play equally, alongside each other, or even for children to see their parents play.

Describing the adults rolling around in the torn paper in front of the Hockney, whilst the children looked on – I think that most people like to play, they just forget they don't really need permission to do so.

Giving space to nonsense: a child's imaginative world

In project work aiming to engage both adults and children it can be difficult to find the common ground, and an activity capable of offering an appropriate degree of challenge for everyone and sustaining their interest. Within Creative Together, one approach that was successful in this regard was to help parents to take the lead from their children, especially learning to enjoy their child's free imagination. Instead of imposing restrictions, on the shape of the work, that stem from either the artists' or the parents' imagination (so that adults govern the creative flow of ideas or the story), some arts practitioners were able to give free reign to the ideas brought by the children, however surreal or unexpected they might be. The best of this work enabled parents to allow and appreciate their child's imagination, and to enjoy being led by their child's ideas.

The skill involved here entails the artists creating and developing a safe space, entrusting their faith in the child's creative lead, accepting any ensuing chaos as part of the process. The example opposite is from a project in which parent / child pairs made short films, using hand-made props constructed mostly from recycled materials. The instance suggests that there was a double benefit in the artists (Sue Walpole and Mick Sugden) being flexible enough to embrace what may have appeared to be nonsense or the absurd in the child-led storyline. It both offered a validating experience for a child whose imagination (and physical energy) was hyperactive, and created a significant emotional breakthrough for his father, who was suffering from depression as a lone parent.

Absurd moments breaking through the smile barrier

Leo has enormous energy, and runs everywhere – a blonde sprite always on the move. Once in the gardens with the cameras, artist Sue Walpole manages his constant stick-throwing and lack of focus with enormous patience – he's like a dragonfly, swooping across the field of play at high speed, swinging back and forth. Finally the team lassoes his energy, and he takes his place behind the camera. An interesting dynamic is in operation in which alien figures, sculpted from recycled materials, are suspended as string puppets, and bob about against a background of dark bushes and shrubs. Following Leo's 'alien visit' narrative, the team films a very surreal scene, in which all the adults are manipulating the puppets with intense focus, and Leo is on camera, occasionally bobbing out, to direct the action by demonstrating what needs to happen next.

Suddenly, Leo's dad laughs out loud – apparently tickled by the absurdity of the whole situation, in which his son has a group of adults wielding handmade puppets of ghoulish aliens and a rocket, dangling by barely visible cotton thread from bamboo canes. This is the very first time I've seen his mood lighten – a significant moment. The storyline itself is very funny, if you see the surreal quality momentarily as ridiculous. But nobody is deterred and they continue to film the scene under Leo's whimsical direction: it's a good flow...

As father and son leave at the end of the session Leo's dad acknowledges that this has been a really good week: "Good team, good session!" he says, as he leaves, all smiles.

(Child and Family Centre film project observation)

Eating together

Several projects in Creative Together took time to eat something together as part of a session. This was an element of the process that to the outsider might seem like wasted time, however there were many benefits to the ritual of sharing food with each other.

In some projects families who attended had very poor experiences of food at home, and artists recognised that they had a role to play in initiating positive eating experiences, in which food itself could become a creative focus. One project designed and cooked food together over an outdoor campfire, and modelled experimenting with new food ideas, trying new tastes. This was important in a group in which a parent had eating disorders that were seriously narrowing her children's diet, and endangering their confidence to try new foods.

In the example opposite eating together is initiated as a way of focussing the group on the creative task. The process which unfolds is of gradual bridge-building and bonding between the group members through the simple food experience. Connections are made, enabling the disparate energies to come together, so that individuals more constructively appreciate each others' contributions. It is effectively team building, to approach a collaborative process which would otherwise be impossible.

The communal food break

The vibe in the group is quite lively, not very focussed, and Bryan Tweddle (artist) suggests taking a food break and discussing ideas. Food arrives and we all stop and share freshly made pakoras, paratha and samosas, sitting together round the table. Kath Shackleton (artist) asks "So what's new? What are people up to? How's life?" It's a very sociable atmosphere. We discuss languages – French (which the boys are learning at school) and Punjabi, their home language. The boys get us to try pronouncing the names of the food authentically – we oblige, and they are amused by our attempts, which are weighted with heavy English accents. But with patient attention they continue correcting, seeking perfection. They then compete in practising their French on us. Bryan says "This is a taste of what it would be like if we were here working together for the whole day – that would be great wouldn't it – we could get really stuck in then!".

One lad swiftly steals Bryan's specs from his nose and places them on the back of his head: he is surprised, but doesn't seem to mind, patiently replacing them. Eventually some ideas are shared, and this forms itself into a loose plan for the remainder of the session. The impression this pause for food leaves me with is of a family meal, it seems strangely intimate, certainly bonding, and is ultimately also effective in finding some focus in the work.

(Stop-frame animation project observation)

Embracing risk and experimentation

In one Creative Together project a good example was offered in how to encourage young children to understand risk, and to judge safety; and in demonstrating their ability in this area to their parents. Working with families there is an opportunity to introduce activities that parents (especially many mums) are less confident to try with their children: in this case making things using power tools. The safety considerations of working with power tools near or directly with children (the nervousness that children's unpredictable behaviour – when they don't understand the dangers of the tools – is bound to result in them injuring themselves) make these kinds of activities daunting. However there are advantages to embracing this risk safely, as the example opposite demonstrates: children can learn about limits and judging safety for themselves, which gives them confidence; and parents see their children's capacity to take responsibility for themselves, and to respect and follow instructions.

Here artist Amy Hield is introducing and modelling both managed risk-taking, in working with power tools with small children, and experimentation with ideas – which don't always work, but which she discusses throughout with the children in the group. The activity confronts parents' fears in both these areas: symptoms of a lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes that often limits children's experience when parents are under pressure. Amy shows how to communicate very consistently with the children in setting safety boundaries, encouraging them to develop 'common sense', as well as to respect to adults' reasonable safety measures. She also deliberately experiments with activity ideas with the group, showing that she values her own failed ideas as part of a creative process.

Experimenting safely with real tools

Amy Hield (artist) is grappling with scrap materials she has brought to make a musical sculpture – plastic and copper piping in different lengths, old cutlery, steel strips. The idea, working with tools, is to drill holes in different items and suspend them from a wooden structure, so that they can be struck to make different sounds. The children become curious, and want to hit the objects to test their sounds, as Amy is. Ashley and I play with the plastic piping tubes, speaking silly messages down them to each other, and blowing sounds, him giggling. Meanwhile Amy tries drilling strips of steel with an electric power drill, but discovers after many attempts with different drill bits that they are too tough. All the children are intrigued, squatting down to watch, but without trying to touch. Amy praises this careful approach, saying she is very impressed. She discusses her thinking processes with the children all the time, and solicits their opinions. When she decides to change tack, setting the drilling aside, (she tells me later that in that moment she made a plan to bring a different tool the following week), she then begins showing the children how to cut copper piping lengths with a plumbers' tool, first discussing how long each length should be to get a different sound. The children help in the cutting process by turning the pipe, their small hands just the right size to grip the slim piping, to hold it steady and turn it. Julie's eldest daughter is very engaged by this, totally focussed on her job, and very careful. It's impressive that Julie seems finally to have relaxed about dirt, mess and safety, she trusts Amy's approach with her children, who lap up the chance to have an important role in a very grown up task with real, heavy tools.

(School-based parenting project observation)

Closing rituals

A device used by many artists in Creative Together was to adopt a repeated closing ritual, to finish each session. The project evaluation described such rituals as central to forming a successful, effective project space, and a healthy, supportive group. Participants are able to use this moment to make sure whatever they have experienced in the workshop is contained, creating a specific space or process they can re-enter in the next workshop.

The rituals themselves varied in character, depending on the project, group and art form, and the best ones are those that arose, or developed their identity as important, from within the group itself. Examples included reflection circles, a special game, cups of tea, even a specific way of clearing up together. One artist working with four-year-old children and their mothers in an art gallery introduced a small closing ritual, described in the observation below:

The whole group gathers round a metal fish sculpture, standing on its tail in a glass case in the entrance hall to the gallery. This is something they do every week, and it's a fitting farewell: if you put a coin in the slot, the metal fish opens to reveal a small figure of a boy, who mechanically bows, stiffly, and then the fish closes up again. The moment is so small, but the children love it. Child after child puts their coin in and the whole group watches as the fish opens to reveal the figure, the children all bow stiffly with the miniature boy, and the fish closes again. Apparently I'm told that even last week when the children didn't attend the session, the parents gathered round to do the fish ritual anyway. This is very interesting. It seems to have become a kind of leaving ceremony, through which they close this experience and keep it safe.

(Gallery project observation)

Fish ritual

Artist Lou Sumray writes:

The fish sculpture was a commission given to Jim Bond to respond to the gallery collection, and was inspired by the Grimm's Fairy Tale etching by David Hockney upstairs of the 'Boy in the fish', which I love as a drawing. I use it to 'end' the session because:

It's a definite thing that gathers everybody together and lets everybody know that this is the end for today;

There is excitement and mystery about it, even though you know what's going to happen;

It's active, and interactive, so a child makes it happen by putting the money in – this gives them control / empowerment;

The little boy inside is bowing to the children, at their eye level.

I introduced the boy's voice, which at first slightly disturbed the children, but then they expected it the next week. I would say "Hello Children, thanks for coming," and bow as a goodbye gesture, but also as a salute of respect to the children. Then I'd add "Come back next week" – which continues and invites: a full stop as well as a comma.

I introduced a bow too, after a few weeks, to return the thank you, and the children chose to follow me – more interaction;

I can add to it with conversations, to develop a story. I can see how I can go further – give it over for the children to think of things the boy would say;

The ritual is serious and humorous, formal and at the same time has a homemade feeling;

One of the parents noticed the Arabic carved in the metal at the side, which she was able to translate as 'Fish' – another surprise, creating more possibilities.

Shared celebration of work

Although the tendency in Creative Together has been to emphasise process over product, prioritising the quality of the creative experience for participants above the pressure to work towards a product deadline, projects still found ways to share and celebrate their completed work with each other. Most projects within the programme included a finale, with a celebration of some kind, sharing the work that had been created during the project.

These events included the unveiling of mosaics, the screening of animated short films or the project DVD, a party with friends and family, and many more examples.

The importance of a final sharing or celebration carries much of the same significance as the 'closing ritual' explained above, and without a finishing ritual of this kind projects may seem to peter out, with much of their potency or impact dissipated. The appreciation of creative work achieved during a project – whether it be celebrating a single piece of work completed, or reflecting together on a continuous process recorded in journals and photographs – therefore has a significant role to play in helping participants process the value of their involvement.

During one project (described opposite) the finale gathered significance both due to the date of the event (in Halloween week) and the concept. A project using film, they decided to create a 'premier' night, with Oscar awards (or 'Hoftas', after the UK BAFTA film and television awards) for each family.

The 'Hofta' film awards: celebrating success

Since I last saw them, the team has completed the edits of their films, and everyone has spent a session creating sparkly gold-painted Oscar / Hofta trophies made with modroc plaster, to be awarded at the 'premier' viewing. The event will include participating families, staff and artists. As I arrive the families are decorating Halloween buns and biscuits, using icing and red liquorice laces for blood. The theme is 'gothic' treats for party food, to follow the viewing. I join in, bringing sponge finger buns to be decorated as severed digits. All the adults are enjoying the process of permission to be gruesome, in their own mini social group which has begun to form through the project. The atmosphere is very industrious and friendly in here. Finally we move to the film screening room, and everyone settles down, adults on chairs, Leo on cushions on the floor, the other two boys on top of each other.

As each highly original film is presented, the audience watches, rapt with delight at the hilarious antics of the model puppets. Sound effects and music added by Mick Sugden (film maker) increase the impact of each piece, and we all cheer and whoop. After the screenings each child is presented with a certificate, and their 'Hofta' academy award. This is a project marked by fun, irony and subtle self-mockery, which feels very healthy. Leo's dad expresses interest in enrolling for a further project, and I'm not surprised: even as a visitor I loved seeing Leo, standing proudly for photos at the end of the presentations. He beamed! Gorgeous. What a way to enable children to feel valued, and their parents to feel proud!

(Child and Family Centre film project observation)

Credits and acknowledgements

A huge thank you to the Big Lottery for funding Creative Together, to all the partner organisations who worked with Artworks to make the projects happen, to the artists and facilitators that ran the sessions, and to all the participants who attended them.



LOTTERY FUNDED

Evaluator notes and project observations courtesy of Anni Raw. Descriptions of projects detail sessions delivered by Amy Hield, Siobhan Mac Mahon, Mick Sugden, Lou Sumray, Frances Taylor, Jonathan Turner, Bryan Tweddle and Sue Walpole. 'Magical talking stones' (page 13) written by Siobhan Mac Mahon. 'Playing together in a gallery space' (page 15) and 'Fish ritual' (page 23) written by Lou Sumray.

Partner organisations

Bevan Healthcare
Bradford Action For Refugees
Bradford Central Library
Canal & River Trust
Cartwright Hall Museum and Gallery
Chapelton Children's Centre
Communityworks
Farcliffe and Lilycroft Children's Centre
Hillbrook Advice Centre
Holmewood Library
The Hope Project
Impressions Gallery
Laisterdyke Business and Enterprise College
Midland Road Nursery and Children's Centre
Mixenden Parents' Resource Centre
Millan Centre
Northorpe Hall
The Oasis Project
PHAB Club
Ryecroft Primary School
Streets Ahead Holmewood
St Edmund's Nursery and Children's Centre
Sue Belcher Community Centre

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Mick Sugden

Amy Hield

James Hill

Lou Sumray

Frances Taylor

Paul Kerfoot

Paul Kierney

Ian Taylor

Toby Thomas

Champak Kumar

Marcus Lee

Jonathan Turner

Bryan Twedde

Irene Lofthouse

Christian Lloyd

Ged Walker

Sue Walpole

Siobhan Mac Mahon

Dan Mallaghan

Zane Whittingham

Sandra Whyles

Participant feedback

“I’ve got loads of ideas now for supporting him.”

“It’s been great to have time out of the house, somewhere we can play freely with the children and give them the chance to play together.”

“If you aren’t learning you feel like something is covering your head. If you come here and learn things it makes you enjoy. It’s easier to teach my children because I know which objects and toys they need to use.”

“The best thing has been learning painting and drawing and playing. All the stuff with communication with the child.”

Participant feedback

“It’s changed how we are as a family. Now I know they need to play and how to play with them.”

“I felt much happier whenever I was involved in the group. I felt less stressed during the sessions. I hardly get any time at home to spend with my son but this project gave me the opportunity to spend one to one time with him.”

“We’re playing *and* learning!”

About Artworks

Artworks Creative Communities

Working in partnership with professional artists, we deliver creative projects that inspire, engage and enable communities and organisations. We use creativity as a force for positive and effective social change.

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Artworks Creative Communities is supported by:



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