

# Holiday Playscheme Review

## Summary

Holiday playschemes are fundamentally important for children whose life opportunities are limited.

It is not difficult to understand why people might perceive holiday playschemes as operating at the softer end of the need spectrum – a nice-to-have for children rather than a need-to-have.

A challenge to this perspective is that it depends on the child. For a child who lives where it is safe to be outside; who has parental involvement in his or her life or who lives in a community where escalating anti-social behaviour is not a defining feature of school holidays, holiday playschemes are still a positive option. However, they are not necessarily essential in the way that they are

for children whose life opportunities are very much more limited. For those children, holiday playschemes can be fundamentally important.

BBC Children in Need recognises that disadvantaged children benefit greatly from attending holiday playschemes. School holidays, especially the long summer breaks, can be isolating and boring for many children, in particular for those experiencing the physical and social effects of poverty and those who are disabled. Holiday playschemes benefit these disadvantaged children by enabling them to connect with friends and sympathetic adults, have experiences that broaden their horizons and give them memories to embrace and share. They play a defining role by providing something to do and creating experiences that children carry into their later lives. Further, the value of holiday playschemes extends beyond individual children's lives onto their family relationships and engagement with their local community.

## Background

Each year BBC Children in Need makes grants to around 150 holiday playschemes for disadvantaged children across the UK. We conducted an in-house review of holiday playschemes in order to increase knowledge and understanding about their delivery. This review consisted of a comprehensive literature review, 68 separate interviews with holiday playscheme providers, 580 children self-completing questionnaires and a focus group of 20 project providers.

## Safety

Among other things, holiday playschemes can provide a place of safety for children. In some communities, playschemes create the only safe space available. There are accounts of playschemes reclaiming space colonised by drug-dealing and other criminal activities and converting it into places where children can experience good adult role models, informal education, fun and friendship.

# Key messages

## Continuity & Structure

Playschemes during the summer, in particular, allow some continuity of the structure provided by school in children's lives. This is crucial to those whose days are formless and whose family life is chaotic. These children are much more at risk than others in the summer and a good playscheme can encourage gains made at school and provide a powerful buffer between the child and alternative unhealthy activities and choices.

## Having a Social Life

Disabled children also critically benefit from the experiences a playscheme can bring to their lives. Social contact outside school, the chance for new experiences, being part of a group and developing confidence and life skills are all vitally important to children whose opportunities for these are often restricted.

## Extending Horizons

For children and young people whose experience of the world is defined and confined by poverty, limited transport and/or territorial or gang boundaries, extending their physical horizon is incredibly important. Trips to locally accessible facilities such as parks, museums and other recreational amenities are the playscheme activities most valued by children. As well as offering the benefits of informal learning, these activities can expand the 'comfort zone' of children and their aspirations for their leisure time.

## Holiday playschemes working with disadvantaged children will likely be more effective if they include many of the following factors:

- Being developed and led by community based individuals and/or groups
- Providing trips and outings to unique and local locations
- Allowing space and time for free play
- Engaging children within each community that are harder-to-reach
- Having funding for activities and related core costs like planning and transport
- Establishing links with local organisations to support and supplement delivery
- Drawing on the local community to volunteer and work in the project.

## Outcomes

Our review identified a wide range of short and longer term benefits for disadvantaged children and young people attending holiday playschemes.

### These included:

- Improvements in social and communication skills
- Providing new experiences, raising aspirations and broadening horizons
- Building confidence and self esteem
- Strengthening friendships and reducing negative peer group influences
- Providing something to look forward to, reducing boredom and isolation
- Offering the only chance to have a sense of holiday, especially in the summer break
- Engaging and diverting young people who offend or are at risk of offending
- Improving engagement with school
- Increased happiness and being more positive
- Improvements in behaviour

### Holiday playschemes are also seen to have wider impacts at:

#### A family level, for example:

- Increased potential for parents to participate in employment and training
  - Providing important opportunities for respite care
  - Improved relationships between children and parent/s
  - Reduced parental isolation through connecting with other local people
  - Increased awareness and links to other services
- #### A community level, for example:
- Improved community cohesion and identity, especially in urban areas
  - Lower levels of crime and anti-social behaviour
  - Enabling integration of marginalised groups within their communities
  - Developing intergenerational relationships that challenge preconceptions
  - Employing local people as staff and volunteers

# Key messages

## **An organisational level, for example:**

- Improved partnership working and multi-agency working
- Providing opportunities to work with children not normally reached
- Raising an organisation's profile within the community
- Developing links with other key local organisations
- Building organisational experience and a more skilled and flexible workforce

## **Being community-led**

Being embedded in the community or community-led adds real value to holiday playschemes working with disadvantaged children. Strong community links enable providers to understand neighbourhood challenges and family situations. Existing relationships with children and families can mean that building trust is often less difficult and it gives providers some prior knowledge of the particular needs of some of the children they support.

A holiday playscheme can be a cohesive and stabilising influence, especially in communities where even young children are more vulnerable to becoming victims of or involved in crime or anti-social activities over the holidays. It also may act as a hub and an entry point through which other services can access more marginalised children and parents in a non-stigmatising and neutral space.

## **Targeting disadvantage**

Holiday playschemes working in disadvantaged areas need to ensure that their local reach includes those children who are particularly disadvantaged and not simply operate on a 'first come, first served' basis. Proactive strategies are needed to ensure that hard-to-reach children are targeted and barriers to access are overcome. For example, reserving a number of places for children with multiple disadvantages can help better engage those who may stand a smaller chance of accessing the playscheme due to a lack of parental involvement. These strategies should encompass children from relevant local minority and marginalised groups.

Local disabled children are not always being proactively engaged in holiday playschemes. This needs to improve alongside an acceptance that in some cases disabled children's engagement has additional costs attached.

## **Children's consultation and participation**

There are real benefits for all children who participate in decision-making within holiday playschemes. This means more than providing feedback on the choice of activities and setting rules. While the short-term nature of holiday playschemes presents challenges for meaningful participation, more emphasis can occur at planning stages on how to actively involve children in the running of the playscheme.

## **Types of activities**

Activities that broaden physical and mental horizons and challenge perceptions around issues such as territory, neighbourhoods, gangs and unfamiliar cultures are recommended for holiday playschemes.

Enabling children to explore local amenities that are free to access, such as parks, libraries, and beaches opens up the chance for them to continue to access these facilities once the playscheme has finished. They also go some way towards breaking down barriers between the community and the children.

Allowing time and space for free play is recognised as beneficial for all children. Free play helps children learn how to work collaboratively, share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, explore choice and use their imaginations. Free play can sometimes be misunderstood as a lack of structure or organised activities.

## Workforce and skills of staff and volunteers

Using local staff and volunteers adds value to a holiday playscheme and the community, particularly in providing positive role models for children.

Rapport with the children and the ability to create a supportive and fun atmosphere and to maintain the trust of parents are at least as important as qualifications.

Because staff have not necessarily had training specifically focused on play skills and development, it is important that on-the-job training is available, accessible and built into staff development plans.

A proactive volunteer strategy significantly assists an organisation's capacity to deliver; however this may need extra financial support or advice to plan and implement effectively.

## Utilising links with other organisations in the community

Having strong links with local statutory and voluntary community organisations enables referrals to and from other services. This is especially important for marginalised children whose families may be wary of or find it difficult to access services that they need. These links also ensure that holiday playschemes make the best of opportunities open to them and share resources as appropriate, for example, accessing free or in-kind support from other organisations is widely used as a way of reducing costs.

Creating effective links requires a holistic approach and relies heavily on the confidence of a project's leader(s).



## Challenges in planning and delivering holiday playschemes

Holiday playschemes are unique amongst other forms of children and young people's provision. They generally receive small grants to deliver projects over short time frames and are traditionally funded on a year-on-year basis. These factors can restrict their longer-term development.

There is an undeveloped appreciation of the value of holiday playschemes. In particular, we found that many local and professional interests fail to be fully aware of the impact of these projects, despite wider recognition that they make a big difference to children.

Many holiday playschemes do not collect information to evidence the difference their project has made in a child's life. This is partly due to their short-term nature and the fact that time and funding for planning is limited. Straightforward ways of gathering evidence to convey a reasonable picture of outcomes for children need to be developed.

While holiday playschemes are relatively low cost for high benefit, the single biggest challenge they face is obtaining the funding needed to be most effective. Planning, monitoring, transport and wages are very important to the effectiveness and sustainability of projects, yet tend to be the most difficult areas for which to get funding. Allowing for and providing some extra funding will not dramatically change the low cost of holiday playschemes, but will enable them to make a more meaningful difference in disadvantaged children's lives.

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For more information on the holiday playscheme review or a copy of the full report please contact:  
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