

Socially prescribed creative play found to boost parents' and children's well-being

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Socially prescribed creative play helps children and their parents develop new skills and promotes well-being, a new study has found.

The University of Leeds-led study evaluated a five-week program of arts-based play, including singing and music-making, for families of children aged up to three. It found that parents benefited from developing social networks and sharing experiences with each other, as well as learning creative approaches to parenting. The families also gained vital information about their child's developmental milestones.

The program, which was developed by leading children's arts charity Theatre Hullabaloo to address concerns about parental well-being following the pandemic, is the first known socially prescribed creative play intervention for families with children of this age.

Social prescription is an approach enabling [health professionals](#) to refer people in need of help to address their health and well-being for non-medical support like local group activities. It can be an effective alternative to medication or other interventions.

Study author Dr. Paige E. Davis, a Lecturer in Developmental Psychology at the University of Leeds' School of Psychology, said, "Social prescription is usually thought to be focused on older and elderly individuals. Recently, there has been a push to facilitate different life transitions through social prescription. The transition to parenthood has been neglected in the past in terms of support offered, despite the importance of the relationship between parent and child in the first 1,001 days."

"Our study shows that social prescribing for parents and children has benefits for both. Parents believe it improves their well-being while giving them opportunities to build social networks and learn new ways to play creatively. Parents also perceive that it improves their children's ability to develop new skills."

Miranda Thain, Artistic Producer at Theatre Hullabaloo, said, "We see

the positive effects of playing creatively with your little one and feeling confident to use those skills in your parenting—whether it be reading, singing or music making—in our work with families every day. Social prescription provides an important route for families who might need extra support and care to take part in programs of this type."

"This research, which demonstrates the value in terms of the well-being of both parent and child, is hugely important as we make the case for better investment in early years creativity, giving families the tools to be the best they can be for each other."

The program consisted of a one-hour session that had a clear yet flexible structure. Activities included sensory and imaginary play installations, play stations with age-appropriate toys, books, and sensory activities, and more structured 'Sing and Play' sessions followed by 'independent creative play' time, where children played together while their parents were offered a hot drink.

Each session culminated with gentle live music played on the flute and ukulele, sensory lights, bubbles, lullabies, and a goodbye song.

Parents noted key differences between the sessions and typical play groups, which they said could be chaotic and overwhelming. The same group of people attended the study sessions week on week, which parents said was better for developing new connections than typical playgroups, which are open to one-off drop-ins.

Especially important to parents was their trust in the prescribers and organization, and the sense of calm that the intervention fostered, because this enabled them to be receptive to practical parenting knowledge and new social relationships.

Parents believed that the socially prescribed creative play positively

impacted their children's development and their own mental health and knowledge.

Further research is needed to evaluate the longer-term impact on children's development and the interactions between parents and their [children](#), the authors say.

The paper is [published](#) in the journal *Public Health*.

More information: Paige E. Davis et al, My favourite part was learning different ways to play: qualitatively evaluating a socially prescribed creative play programme, *Public Health* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.puhe.2024.01.032](#)

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