

Case studies: How can the arts and creativity support people who are shielding or vulnerable during Covid-19?

Project: Supersmashers and Creative Families

Organisation: South London Gallery

Region: Greater London

Introduction

Supersmashers is an art and play project for up to 200 looked-after children aged 6-12 living in Southwark. Running since September 2012, the project brings together two interlinking strands: weekly after-school sessions and family trips every school holiday.

Artists draw from their practice to introduce the group to new materials, processes and experiences. These starting points enable the children to explore their own creative expression, following their own interests and working with others. In the past they have

explored woodwork and powertools; filming and live digital projections; casting, dough-making and soap-carving; den-building and installations amongst other things. The programme is run by an experienced team, supporting artists to lead the sessions.



During covid-19, we have maintained the programme remotely through:

- 10 creative play packs (and more on the way)
- Three instructional videos, featuring staff known to the children

The focus has been on maintaining relationships with the children that are known to us, and continuing to provide creative and play opportunities for children in their homes.

Creative families is an early intervention arts programme for parents experiencing mental health difficulties and their children aged under 5 years. Creative families' aims to engage vulnerable families in an inner city area to promote mental well-being through engaging in a series of artist led workshops, over 10-weeks. Creative families runs in partnership

with the Southwark Parental Mental Health Team (PMHT), South London Gallery (SLG) and local children centres. The Creative families' programme is usually held in 2 venues; a local children's centre and the SLG.

This year's project was due to take the form of a 10-week project with families in the summer term 2020, with artist Mai Omer at Rye Oak Children's Centre. This element is postponed, however we have adapted to begin the project ahead of being able to deliver the full programme at a later date. We have launched this year's project through creative packs for

the families, which are being hand-delivered to families by the parental mental health team. These packs are designed to support the parents to playfully interact with their child and to observe their development and learning through creative activities such as: measuring their growing limbs with string, playing music, using household objects to create sculptures and annotate a sketchbook. The parental mental health team are keen to know how these observations might feed into their work with the families- and how they might aid in self-reflection.

Image credit: South London Gallery

Funders

- Supersmashers is funded by BBC Children in Need.
- Creative Families is funded by the Parental Mental Health team.

Who is it for?

We have continued to work with vulnerable families during covid-19 through our Supersmashers and Creative Families programmes:

- Supersmashers works with children looked after
- Creative Families works with parents experiencing mental health difficulties and their children under five.

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What outcomes were/are you aiming for?

Our core aims for the Supersmashers programme are for looked after children to:

- feel more positive to engage in playful activities
- have increased confidence in their creative abilities, a greater sense of “being good at” something. It is hoped that this will lead to the longer term impact of increasing the children’s self-esteem.
- increased social skills.

These continue to be our broad aims, however during Covid-19, we were additionally mindful of the impact on the children’s sense of wellbeing. Our focus has been on maintaining relationships with the children that are known to us, and continuing to provide creative and play opportunities for children in their homes. We have adopted a tailored approach, with a personal feel, with the aim of keeping children feeling connected to the programme, the staff and to each other through a continued sense of belonging to “Supersmashers” - a collective identity as looked after children which aims to build resilience, a sense of belonging and positive associations to the label ‘looked after child.’ The aim through this is to:

- maintain consistency, to help the children to feel safe in uncertain times
- maintain connection, with the aim of reducing a sense of isolation.

Creative Families works with parents experiencing mental health difficulties and their children aged under 5 years. Our core aims for the parent:

- Reduce parents feelings of stress and anxiety
- Improve mood
- Increased confidence
- Reduce feelings of social isolation
- Promote positive engagement and attachment between parent and child
- Promote the emotional, social and cognitive development of the child.

We are aware that parents already experiencing these feelings will have been under increased pressure during Covid-19.

Where is it happening?

South East London

Are you working in partnership?

- Supersmashers is in partnership with Southwark Children's Services.
- Creative Families is run in partnership with Southwark's Parental Mental Health team, part of SLaM.

How many people took/are taking part?

- Supersmashers: 5 foster families, working with 9 children (inc. foster siblings) and an unknown number of adults at one child's group home.
- Creative Families: 16 Local Families.

For how long has it been happening?

- The work with Supersmashers is ongoing since 2012.
- Creative Families has been running since 2013, taking the form of artist-led projects. This year's project was due to take the form of a 10-week project with families in the summer term 2020, with artist Mai Omer. This element is postponed, however, we have launched this year's project through creative packs for the families who will be joining us later in the year.

What were/are the main outputs?

Supersmashers:

- Children are encouraged to make, create and play with the materials in their packs.
- Whole foster families are encouraged to work together both in response to 'blended' instructional packs and to more freely-chosen play prompts and ideas. (physical materials and tools as well as online videos)
- There are no plans to exhibit their work at this time.

Creative Families:

- parents are encouraged to use their creative play packs to play with their children and create a journal of their experiences. These are for personal use and will not be exhibited.

Feedback:

Supersmashers:

- Encouraged whole foster families to make and play together
- Kept children occupied and engaged in creative making
- An exciting 'event' in the children's week when parcels arrived

Creative Families:

The packs have only just been delivered, so we are waiting to hear feedback from families.

What have been the challenges and successes for you?

Supersmashers:

Challenges:

- getting materials and parcels together on time (slower deliveries and difficulty in getting materials)
- Slow postal services and items getting lost (once)
- Clearly communicating specific creative tasks (over video for example)
- Not being able to be in touch with participants over social media/zoom due to safeguarding

Successes:

- Being able to stay in touch via phonecalls with foster carers
- Sending supportive gifts to foster carers during carers fortnight- seemed to give a massive morale boost to them during this difficult time
- Being able to continue with the aims of the project and keep children's creative processes going, furnishing them with materials and tools that they may not have had at home

Creative Families:

Challenges:

- getting materials and parcels together on time (slower deliveries and difficulty in getting materials)
- Slow postal services and items getting lost
- Clearly communicating specific creative tasks
- Not being able to be in touch with participants over social media/zoom due to safeguarding

Successes:

- Getting the parcels hand-delivered to the families by the parental mental health team
- Continuing partnership working with parental mental health team despite changes in everyone's working conditions

Further information

<https://www.southlondongallery.org/projects/supersmashers/>

<https://www.southlondongallery.org/projects/creative-families/>

The South London Gallery was founded in the 1890s with a stated purpose to "bring art to the people of south London"; and this is a vision which holds true to this day. Over the past twenty five years the gallery has focused on profiling international and British contemporary artists through a programme of exhibitions, film, performance, artist commissions and residencies, and has built a reputation for our inclusive education and outreach projects rooted in philosophies of creative child-led play.