

My Place to Play

An interagency response to addressing the needs of young children living in emergency accommodation

This community action research explores an interagency response to supporting parents living in emergency accommodation to provide a safe, playful, developmentally appropriate environment for their babies and young children. Research highlights the importance of parental involvement if their children are to thrive in education and life. This work and its findings show the positive effects of interagency working at local, regional, and national level to improve outcomes for children and families.

Introduction

Homelessness, war and displacement, and international protection have become familiar terms in our media outlets. Access to adequate housing dominates the needs of those experiencing these situations in Ireland. But there is little focus on the impact on the social-emotional, communication, play, and physical development of young children living in such precarious circumstances. The social infrastructures designed for families in these circumstances can also be difficult to navigate for professionals seeking to support families.

My Place to Play is an evidence-based programme for professionals and parents to reimagine play opportunities for young children aged 0–3 years living in confined conditions. It provides a basis for interagency collaboration for professionals at local and national level to work across organisational strategies towards common objectives and government policy goals. Community action research harnesses the power of participant voices by ensuring that the needs of families, children, and professionals are central to future iterations of the programme.



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My Place to Play

My Place to Play was created to enhance the learning and physical development of infants living in homelessness. Due to lack of space and parental stress because of homelessness, Area-Based Childhood (ABC) programmes in Dublin City North were concerned that there were few opportunities for infants to enhance their physical and social development through play, which is a fundamental pillar for healthy development and learning (DCYA, 2014; ELI, 2020). Literature both nationally and internationally highlights how children in precarious living conditions are at risk for inadequate play opportunities (Raghallaigh et al., 2019; Brents, 2020; Chen & Knoll, 2022).

Through these observations, Marion Byrne developed a play mat as part of her research to create a play space for infants that aligns with best practice and national early-years policy. Her research highlighted that even just 15 minutes a day for play can enhance infants' physical and social development (Byrne, 2018). A mobile play mat filled with evidence-based play resources was developed to provide a space for families to enhance parent-child interactions, prioritise play, and promote physical development through 'tummy time'. The resources are all linked to *Aistear*, as the core components enhance children's well-being, identity, and belonging (NCCA, 2009).

Local innovation to national mainstream

The programme soon drew attention from Dublin City North's Children and Young People Services Committee (CYPSC). ABC programmes from the area came together to pool resources, use Healthy Ireland funding, and support from CYPSC to create briefing seminars for professionals to implement My Place to Play and to continuously evaluate the materials provided to families.

The combined expertise of the ABC programmes and engagement of 220 families and practitioners in the programme in 2018–2019 led to a project framework that garnered support from Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) and CYPSC national offices in Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Through the programme, it was evident that My Place to Play demanded capacity to influence change in practices, understanding, and the conditions of practice (Kemmis, 2009) and a collaborative effort in all stages of planning and implementing the programme.

An interagency National Implementation Group was established with representatives from International Protection Accommodation Services in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY); Tusla Homeless Liaison; PPFS; CYPSC national and local offices; and the Early Learning Initiative at National College of Ireland. With funding from the Department of Justice and support from the Katherine Howard Foundation,

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Oakfield Trust, and the Children's Rights Alliance, a further 248 families living in international protection and 52 practitioners engaged in 2020.

By 2022, an additional 1,375 families and 177 practitioners were engaged to provide support to families fleeing the Ukrainian crisis and living in international protection. The number engaged was a direct result of intense collaboration at national and local level where the DCEDIY provided funding to support the National Implementation Group to work with City and County Childcare Committees and other local infrastructures, such as Family Resource Centres, to reach as many families as possible who were entering Ireland at unprecedented levels.

Community action research

Community action research is used with this programme to harness the capacity to influence change in practices, understanding, and the conditions of practice (Kemmis, 2009). The approach ensures that participant feedback is incorporated into future iterations of the programme in order to be responsive to emerging needs.

As a result of this method, satisfaction rates are over 90% for both practitioners and parents. Parents said they found the My Place to Play information helpful, as they learned about their child's development and learning and how play can support parent-child bonding. Professional feedback highlights how My Place to Play gave parents more understanding of and opportunities to play. For their professional practice, they highlighted that they were more equipped to encourage and understand the importance of play time and to build relationships with parents. One social worker said:

It gave me an opportunity to build my relationship with mum from the start and do something positive and beneficial for her and the children together. In child protection work, families do not always see us as supportive from the start, and I feel mum was less defensive as a result of being able to provide this outlet for her and her child.

The findings of the interagency work highlighted how working collaboratively had positive outcomes for families and children and allowed for positive working relationships for future projects.

Combining the data from all cohorts, we continue to find that using community action research to harness the expertise of a range of stakeholders has the powerful effect of breaking silos to meet the needs of families who need support most.

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Conclusion

While we continue to promote the importance of play and parent-child interactions through My Place to Play, the overall objective is to ensure that families are strong and healthy in adversity. The programme highlights how community action research can be used as a positive approach to harness complex social infrastructures. Working collaboratively with interagency partners at local and national level ensures that parents have access to supports that are vital to ensuring their children can thrive. Engaging all stakeholders in My Place to Play requires the expertise at all levels and committed personnel to driving change that uses and drives national policy. Only by working together in this way can long-term change be realised for some of our most marginalised children.

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