



## Active Families Evaluation Report

The focus of this report is to explore the outcomes relating to a dance project aimed at children under 5 years of age and their families. Numerous research projects in dance and health have sought to explain the physical health benefits of dance for children and young people over the past decade, and it is now widely accepted that creative dance can offer health outcomes which can tackle childhood obesity and support the positive development of psychological outcomes such as self-esteem and body confidence. Our participation in physical activity is also closely associated to the social connections we build with others.

The focus of this project has been to examine the social impacts of creative dance for children under the age of 5 years with their close and extended families and build evidence for the continued provision of this activity not only for the positive health outcomes that we know dance delivers, but for the social inclusion benefits which are vital for healthy, sustainable lives particularly in the early years.

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## Acknowledgements

The *Active Families* project came about when Dance Network Association received funding from the Essex Challenge Prizes (Essex County Council supported by NESTA for the Families Included Prize 2016) for a family dance programme called The Interactive Family Dance Programme. The project proposal was shared with colleagues at the Borough of Barking and Dagenham who wanted to explore this project further in their locality, with the aim of bringing together communities and members of diverse cultures for a shared endeavour. The Barking and Dagenham project *Active Families* forms the basis of this report. The programme was funded by the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham (Public Health) with a further Families Included Prize won by Dance Network Association to support project delivery. This report forms the second part of an evaluation incorporating two other 10-week projects which are also taking place in Harlow and Colchester during 2017. This funding has allowed us to explore the impact of the project in reaching our aims more thoroughly.

*Active Families* has been delivered by Louise Klarnett with support from Emily Jenkins, on behalf of Dance Network Association. Louise Klarnett is a dance artist specialising, though not exclusively, in working with the early years children. She has developed an extensive dance and movement practice working with young babies to ninety-plus year olds in diverse communities, leading regular and one-off sessions, projects and workshops in children's centres, nurseries, schools, colleges, day centres, sheltered housing, hospices and hospitals. Louise leads the Active Start programme in schools in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham.

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Participant names have been changed in this report in order to protect anonymity.

## The Context of Social Isolation and Loneliness and How Dance Can Help

Social isolation is defined as the 'inadequate quality and quantity of social relations with other people at the different levels where human interaction takes place' (Public Health England, 2015, p. 8). It is a determinant of health that the Government is seeking to address between 2016 and 2019 within the Public Health Outcomes Framework (Domain 1.18; DH, 2016). Evidence suggests that social isolation is present throughout the lifecourse and affects not just daily relationships with close family, but can cascade to our interactions with our wider communities and larger social environment (The Marmot Review, 2010). The literature also connects social isolation with loneliness (Griffiths, 2016) – a distressing, subjective emotional state, which can occur regardless of the social structures a person experiences.

The opportunity to relate and socialize with others is important throughout our lives. Healthy relationships with others improve physiological health and psychological wellbeing (Yang et al, 2016), positively affect healthful behaviours such as healthy eating and physical activity (Bailey, 2005) and reduce the risk of morbidity (Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton, 2010) and mortality (The Marmot Review, 2010). Much recent research has focused on our aging population in the UK and the increasing social isolation and loneliness they experience. In turn, this places our services under increasing pressure to treat the effects of isolation. The Marmot Review reports that those who are socially isolated and feel lonely are 1.8 times more likely to visit their GP, 1.6 times more likely to visit A+E and 3.5 times more likely to enter local authority funded residential care (2010).

Yet social isolation and feelings of loneliness are also prevalent in young families, especially where expectant and new mothers lack a socially supportive environment (Barlow and Coe, 2012). Without meaningful social interactions beyond the immediate family group, mothers are more likely to experience poor mental health. Research examples suggest that chronic maternal depression can impact early childhood development and has the potential to affect the child's mental health as they mature (Apter et al, 2013). Individual factors such as age, gender, income and ethnicity all have a part to play in one's sense of social inclusion; these are augmented, or compounded by community factors (access to and availability of services) and societal factors (economic and political climate) too. Social isolation is exacerbated by lower economic status and poor education opportunities (Fokkema, De Jong Gierveld, and Dykstra, 2012), thus geographical location, access, economic status and education are part of a wider picture around social isolation

as well. This provision is therefore particularly vital amongst communities where inequalities exist – targeting early years work towards communities located in areas of economic, health and access deprivation is pertinent. The aim of this project has been to tackle social isolation through prevention, rather than treatment, by offering a service that allows children and their families to connect to one another.

Lack of social connection has been shown to slow down children’s physical and cognitive development (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2016) and thus, much clinical and cultural practice in the UK now points to the importance of opportunities for families to socially connect between themselves and with others. Two important strands of this work are emphasized in the early years development literature; that of play, and touch. ‘Play is essential to development [and] is recognized as a right of every child’ (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 182). At different stages of development, play enables the child to understand and relate to the world and to others, moving through developmental stages of dissociated play alongside other children and adults, to pretend play, collaborating with others to create imaginary worlds. Through our playful encounters we socially interact with others at different levels, with people we know well and those who are new to us. Vygotsky coined the notion of social learning, beginning with social contacts and exchanges between people as the basis for learning and ongoing interactions; the child starts to learn cooperatively and will eventually practise these skills alone as they develop (1962). Sherbourne (2001) explains the importance of building different relationships through developmental play with children and young people, termed ‘relationship play’ (p. 5). Importantly, through such playful encounters with adults and other children, body awareness is developed and physical and emotional security can be nurtured. In turn the child gains confidence from the way they are supported; ‘the child finds it safe to commit and trust’ (p. 3). The process of relationship play enables a range of modes of communication including verbally, through eye contact and developing physical literacy – all are important factors in successful transition into school life at Reception age. In the case of the Active Families Project, we sought to draw on Sherbourne’s principles of relationship play, mostly between primary carer and child, but also where appropriate between children and in relation to other adults, as well as adults interacting too. Thus, opportunities to interact and meet new people early in life can contribute to normal physical and cognitive learning through a social learning model.

'Fostering the ability to interact positively with other people, to share, co-operate and work together, is perhaps one of [our] most important tasks' (Van Papendorp and Friedman, 1997, p. 107). Dance is well placed to support the development of healthy and positive relationships amongst children and young people, and indeed their families. It can foster a sense of a learning community, drawn together by a common enjoyment of dance and movement, but in which the social relationships formed through dancing together are also a key factor. In this regard, dance is often seen as a means to strengthen identity and therefore enable social cohesion across the life course. Dance opportunities for early years children and their families supports social development through its non-verbal nature which 'paves the way for experiences in socialisation that are not limited by language' (Van Papendorp and Friedman, p. 107), or indeed where language has not yet developed. Common community dance practice encourages children to engage in movement games and playful exchanges with their peers, families and other adults, as well as learning movement phrases which develop their physical literacy and motor skill development (Greenland, 2000).

A particular skill developed through dance of controlled physical contact with others is the use of touch, where body parts connect and share weight. This requires 'trust, sensitivity and physical respect' (Paine and NDTA, 2014, p. 33) and a growing awareness of oneself in relation to others. Thus, touch is an equally important process of a child's development and sense of belonging as it regulates perceptions and emotions (Kisilevsky et al, 1991). The experiences of early interpersonal touch are also associated with positive self-esteem, life satisfaction and social competence later in life (Jones and Brown, 1996). In the early years, Lamont (in Pasch, 2017) suggests that children should spend 50% of their time in the arms of their parents and 50% of their time on their tummies exploring the world with adults' careful attention and support. Not only does parent-child interpersonal touch have long-lasting impacts on children's physical and psychological development, but developmental patterns are enabled and children's 'bodyfulness' is realized (Pasch, 2017, p. 6).<sup>\*</sup> Importantly, the social bonds that children make are reinforced by physical understanding, thus, potentially contributing to the reduction of social isolation for them and, by default, their supporting adults.

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<sup>\*</sup> There are numerous academic texts which outline the universal developmental milestones of babies and children which support normal progression through childhood. It is not the scope of this report to outline them here, although play and touch are considered as key features in dance practice with early years' participants and their families.



Movement play and touch

### **Aims of Dance Network Association Early Years Provision**

With this theoretical background, the aims of the organisation's early years provision are:

- To advise, support and educate young children aged 0-5 years of age and their families about dance and the role it can play in tackling childhood obesity, loneliness and social isolation
- To create an environment for families to come together and make friends
- To contribute to the creation of happier lives through physical activity which will help to improve health
- To aid the development of children's motor skills and cognition ready for school
- To increase confidence and reduce social isolation

## Active Families in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham

The Active Families project in Barking and Dagenham drew on the overall aims of the early years programmes run by Dance Network Association across Essex, but also Louise had these specific aims as a focus:

- To introduce dance and movement skills
- To develop self esteem and confidence in the child, parents and carers
- To explore teamwork and cooperation
- To support healthy living through dance
- To increase knowledge, skills and independence
- To have fun!

Class objectives included:

- To use a variety of rhymes, props and language to enable children and parents/ carers to interact with one another and the rest of the group through movement and dance
- To become playfully involved and engaged in regular classes
- To engage socially and enjoy relating to each other, other adults and other children
- To enable children to begin to communicate and express their own needs and ideas either verbally or physically
- To enjoy rhymes, moving to music, making sounds and music, games and story making
- To listen, pay attention and respond to instructions
- To gain confidence in their physical abilities and have fun trying out new skills
- To respond imaginatively by imitating, pretending and exploring

### **Descriptive Data of Participants**

#### *Attendance*

The Active Families project ran for 10 weeks between April and July 2017, located in the foyer studio space at The Broadway in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. A total of 125 attendances were recorded, reaching 31 different family groups. Many children and their parents/ carers returned each week with a core group of approximately 15 children and families attending each week. By the final week of delivery, it was clear that a core group of participants had emerged, keenly asking when the next term of sessions would re-commence. In part, attendance at the session was governed by existing friendship groups coming to the sessions together; one group of three parents and carers reported that this was a great time for 'our children to get together, play and for us to have time together too.' Thus, these sessions served not only to introduce family groups to others in their locality, but also to consolidate existing relationships and provide time for them to flourish. In week eight, 16 family groups attended the session; whilst

a great attendance figure to achieve, this was difficult for the artists to manage and it became clear that attendance should be capped at 15 families at each session for the size and nature of the space available. As a result the artists advised families to arrive early to ensure their space. Attendance throughout the term grew, primarily because parents would tell others about the sessions, so it would appear that word of mouth in marketing these workshops is a very useful tool, with parents advocating for the work amongst their peers. For future projects, it may be wise to introduce an advance sign-up list for parents for the term or half term, or even week to week to ensure families do not need to be turned away at the door.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

A wide range of families were reached through this project.

<b>Description</b>	<b>Data</b>
Total Children Reached	31 children (29 family groups; 2 families with 2 siblings)
Age Range	9 months to 4 years 6 months Mean age: 28.32 months (2 years, 3 months); SD 8.46 (approx. 8 months)
Gender: Children	14 female; 17 male
Gender: Parents and Caregivers	31 female All caregivers were female and included both parents and grandparents
Disability: Children	0
Disability: Parents and Caregivers	1 mother declared pregnancy
Ethnicity: Children	White British: 2 White Other: 6 Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British: 3 Asian/ Asian British: 19 Mixed/ Multiple: 1
Ethnicity: Parents and Caregivers	White British: 2 White Other: 6 Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British: 5 Asian/ Asian British: 18

### *Other Family-based Exercise Patterns*

Families were asked what other physical activity they engaged in with their children. Twenty-seven children participated in no other physical activity apart from the dance sessions as part of the Active Families project. Four children did other activities such as swimming, playgroup and football for toddlers. In informal discussions with families about their engagement with activities outside those provided by this project, parents explained the importance of this activity in particular. For many they had not been to the Broadway before, although its close vicinity to the Library made it an easy transition to come to the theatre. A number of parents reported the Library as a hub of activity and information and it is here that they found flyers for the Active



Families programme. For them, services that are drop-in and conveniently located near other services are more likely to be used. For others, physical activity is not a regular part of their lifestyle; it could be suggested that over 85% of families attending the sessions are keen to engage in activities which have a physical nature to them but that also allow them to spend quality time with their child, despite not normally participating in physical activity. One mother reported that often she would have to leave the borough to access artistic activities such as galleries and museums, and that the cost of the activity and travel could be problematic. She works really hard to ensure that her child accesses lots of different services and activities across the capital but suggested there could be more incentive for families, especially those with limited income to help them provide balanced activities for their child. Access, awareness and availability are critical in ensuring that family groups can reach these opportunities, given the wealth of evidence which suggests that physical activity, artistic engagement and connectedness are all constructs which contribute to wellbeing.

The theoretical constructs which dominate the literature with regard to enabling social inclusion and reducing perceptions of isolation and loneliness are informed by understanding participants' access to services, both in terms of financial and location implications, but also in terms of what they know about the service they are accessing and how it might add to their skills, knowledge and understanding. These principles guide the evaluation of the project in terms of its set up, as well as content and modes of delivery.

### **Access**

The Active Families project was located at The Broadway, a touring theatre venue in the centre of Barking. The theatre provided space for the sessions in kind and the theatre's location is central to local shopping, parking and other amenities such as the local library. It was considered ideal in reaching families already in the town centre and provided a space for dance, movement and play to occur. It is important to acknowledge that new families were visiting the venue where they had not before, widening the reach of potential new audiences for the theatre too. Whilst the space itself was adequate for the classes, and well located for the public entering the building, the space was in effect the theatre foyer, closed off by black curtains. It was regularly entered by employees and performers at the venue during the sessions, meaning that there were occasional distractions; the artists made every attempt to minimise these interruptions although of course there was often no way around this issue. For some children, the lure of the curtains and outside space,

meant that their attention was drawn away from the activity offered by Louise. This was an added layer of classroom management which Louise and Emily worked with well, nevertheless sometimes this made for distractions amongst some of the class members. The acoustics of the space were problematic. Of course the nature of this group is one of noise, and with children and parents speaking at the same time as the artists, this often made communication even more difficult; especially so given that English was not everyone's first language. The floor is also hard and tiled, making high impact activity impossible for health and safety reasons. Louise was meticulous in ensuring that high impact activity was adapted, but reports from some parents were that one attendee did not return because of the floor itself. Jasmine was also concerned about the nature of the floor. There is no doubt that the space is conveniently located, and indeed workable, but exploring other venue options, or space within the theatre would be fruitful. It may be appropriate to budget for a floor covering for use in that space to provide a little more cushioning and cleanliness throughout.



'Hello!'  
Sessions starting at The Broadway

The London Borough of Barking and Dagenham is an area of multiple deprivation, and after Tower Hamlets and Hackney, is the third most deprived borough of London and the 12<sup>th</sup> most deprived out of the 326 local authorities in England (LBB, 2016). Numerous indicators of deprivation are evident in the area, with unemployment the highest rate in any London borough and homelessness having risen since 2009. In addition, four social indicators of health (worklessness, low pay, housing and homelessness) are particularly poor across the borough. 27.8% of children in the borough live in poverty compared to 21.8% in London and 18% in England respectively. Furthermore, evidence also suggests that indicators of deprivation such as these impact different population groups disproportionately.

The borough has seen the highest growth rate of Black and Ethnic Minority school goes in London with research suggesting that poverty risk varies between ethnic groups; for example Pakistani households are three times more likely to be in poverty than white British families (LBB, 2016). Given that over 60% of attendees were of Asian and Pakistani origin, it may well be that participants of the Active Families programme were living with this experience.\* Indeed, all families report their postcodes within the borough, and are thus at risk of these inequalities. Whilst we have not collected income and employment data for the purposes of this project, targeted activity in some of the more deprived wards such as Gascoigne, Heath and Village may ensure that other families, less inclined to travel into the borough centre, might attend, and longer term raise aspirations towards adopting healthy lifestyles which engage with local communities regardless of economic and/ or location access issues. Discussions between Dance Network Association and the borough have focussed on the provision of more outreach work in different localities, which longer term would feed the central Active Families programme at The Broadway. Above all, it is vital that this provision remains free for those choosing to access it, parents remarked how important that was in their sustained attendance over the course of the term: ‘the fact that this is free is so important, it means I don’t have to make a choice for my little girl, I can come and it costs me nothing and she and I get to see and meet others, it’s so important.’

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\* Further detailed information is available at: <https://www.lbb.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/5.1-Children-and-adults-in-poverty-2016.pdf>

## **Developing Social Relationships**

A clear focus of the dance sessions was to create a play-based learning environment in which children and their families could foster new social relationships, amongst themselves but also with other new children and adults. Louise enabled cohesion amongst group participants by employing an encouraging, positive and welcoming environment for them to explore. A smiling and open expression was important, direct eye contact between the artists and the parents and carers and using physical demonstration and touch helped to overcome any language barriers too and was a vital first step in bringing the community together.

Throughout the sessions, there was a spirit of non-judgement, especially so when activities and actions were offered to the young children and their lack of response was not judged, but rather the engaged response was modelled between adults. As a result the children would very quickly join in and that behaviour was positively reinforced. Both Louise and Emily reflect that often children would be reticent to participate when first entering the space, but when parents and carers joined in, letting their children observe and witness the activity, they would often join in and overcome reticence due to an unfamiliar space, tiredness, shyness or mood in general. Furthermore, both Louise and Emily adopted teaching and learning strategies which echoed the movements and actions that the children did, particularly when they self-initiated rolls, tummy-time, role-playing and so on. Simply by copying the action, the children would recognise themselves as the leader in the relationship and greater social interaction would ensue. This is a well-used teaching strategy but one which particularly engenders a sense of trust and reciprocity amongst those taking part; it was a clear building block of developing social relationships for this group. The trust was visible between the artists and the children themselves as their confidence and familiarity with each other and the movement ideas grew. Children would more and more readily leave their parents to stand with Louise and Emily, physically responding to question-based instructions and engaging with the activity. Louise reports in her reflective notes, that Abi would often come over to her and Emily at the end of the class, re-practising movement ideas from earlier on: 'she approached E[mily] and I, but crawling, as everyone was leaving, and we asked whether she was crawling like a lion. I roared.' Later, Louise reports that Abi 'galloped and engaged with us mostly in a non-verbal way. Very happy, very energetic and demonstrating a nice use of her own physicality. Roaring, slithering, galloping.'

It is important to acknowledge the spirit of non-judgement amongst the adults too. Louise reflects that she worked hard to ensure physical responses from the parents and carers, and that this was a time for them to physically move as well as a time to enable their children to be active. Louise and Emily danced fully throughout the sessions to help the adults feel unobserved in the physical environment that was created. Louise emphasised a focus on posture amongst the adults, especially when bending down to the children, and always offered differentiated tasks for adults so that they could participate at a level which suited their own physical capability. In Jasmine's observation of the sessions, she notes that she saw, 'an increase in body confidence and increased ease in movement.' Parents were moving from standing to the floor, focussed on the task of accompanying their child or working with a prop and as such there was a real shift in the adults' physical agility as the project progressed. There is much practice-based evidence in dance to suggest that task-focussed activity often elicits greater movement and dynamic range and indeed that was the case here.



Children approaching other adults in their movement play

It is clear that the social relationship between the children and the artists was consolidated through repeated activity from week to week, which was gently scaffolded to increase complexity,

but provided a familiar and safe framework from which to develop. An example of this is starting sessions with bodywork activities such as the 'pizza massage'. The child's carer offers the child a massage, using the analogy of a pizza, 'knead the dough, rub in the tomato puree, chop and slice the ingredients, sprinkle the cheese, dot on the olives and then have a pretend nibble (or kiss!) of your pizza!' (artist), alerting the adults to good posture (hinging at the joints rather than rounding the spine) and emphasising gentle chopping and pretend nibbling so that when the children are the 'makers' they are gentle. The later sessions saw increased levels of physical touch, many children touching their parent or carer during the bodywork section of the class, but also ready to run and hug parents and carers during activities and lying on top of them during the rainbow and feather activities.



Lying with mummy at the end of class

Social cohesion was enabled in a number of other ways too:

- *Use of props such as the rainbow, puppets, feathers and elastic.* When the rainbow parachute was used it often brought about a calming effect amongst the group as the session started to end. As the children became more familiar with the structure of the session, they were able to more effectively get ready for the rainbow and anticipated its effect. As it was gently waved over the children's bodies and along the line, the calming

effect was instantly observable. Voices quietened and the eyes would track its movement, as the children shifted their attention and focus towards the prop. Yet because all the children and adults were focussed on the same thing, and shared the calming sensation of the prop, Emily observes that this immediately brought the group together, rather like a shared understanding of what this sensation brings to the physicality of the body.

The finger puppets brought about a sense of playfulness in children and adults alike through tasks associated with role playing. As the puppets met one another, social interaction was inherently fostered through the characters that the children created and as both the parents/ carers and Emily report, 'there was so much joy in the room at this moment.'

Feathers have unpredictable movement patterns when blown or moved by people's movement in the space. They would land on other people, and unintentional interactions especially between the children would come about. Adults worked with children other than their own, and because of the delicate nature of the feathers' movement, this brought about a light, calm movement quality in the participants too, and time to notice one another's reactions to the movement of the feathers. However, Louise observes that the bubbles brought about greater sociability amongst the children than the feathers, perhaps because they allowed children to move more readily around the space, rather than towards a specific object that they knew belonged to them at that time. Combining props and activities in this way created different ways in for different children's needs.

The elastic stretched round the whole group in a circle, using language to take it up high and down low and from side to side and aimed to encourage memory for movement using a set pattern which was built up during the piece of music. This required collaboration between all involved to move the elastic harmoniously; this heightened when the children moved over and under the elastic and the adults had to work together to maintain the circle formation, change its angle and movement quality. This activity meant that eye contact was necessary between adults in order to communicate together as a team, which brought about new connections amongst them through their chatter and laughter, aside from their children's activity. Thus a growing inter- and independence between child and adult was facilitated.



Finger puppets and feathers

- *Sound.* The accompanying sound which Louise used in her sessions was very clearly curated to support the physical activity that occurred. During one session, the whole activity was planned around the story of *Famous Sally*, the sound landscape creating a fantastical world in which to move and match the imaginative dance journeys that the children were taking. During the elastic activity, Louise would often accompany this with Bob Marley's *Jammin'* to provide a clear rhythmical structure for the movement. Its familiarity transcended across the adult group, with them singing along to the lyrics and smiling enthusiastically at each other. Memories were clearly evoked at this moment with one parent remarking, 'that is such an important song and it makes me remember my childhood, I loved it!'
- *Circle formations* were returned to again and again throughout the session and all sessions started and ended in a seated circle. This is a well-used tool within community dance practice as everyone is equal and can relate to each other visually or aurally or through touch. Emily observed that the circle formation would often appease disgruntled children and immediately bring them into the group; a change in their mood was immediately observable as the sense of social time was adopted.
- *Oppositional changes.* Many of the movement games that Louise used in her sessions drew on oppositional changes such as stop and go, fast and slow, high and low, in and out, up and down. These sudden changes of direction or pacing would bring about laughter, often because of not being able to keep up, or encountering someone else in their physical



space. Because of the shared experience of laughter, and the physical and cognitive challenges that these changes brought about, social interaction was again fostered through a community of experience and learning.

- *Parameters.* Because of the challenges of the large group in a relatively small space with poor acoustics, parameters were firmly encouraged throughout. These included waiting for the sessions to begin, taking turns with activities such as the movement circuit, and sharing props such as scarves and feathers, especially when it came to returning them to Louise and Emily at the end of the activity. Louise was also firm with parents, encouraging them not to talk but focus on their child and learn by doing; she also took time to explain why activities were important for their child's development. Louise observes that she was quite firm with one parent who said it was easier to carry her child rather than let her play on her tummy. The child would often grizzle in this position. Despite language being a barrier here, Louise suggested that the child be placed on their tummy during the session. As time progressed, Louise and Emily observed that the child readily spent time on their tummy, spinning on her belly and reaching forward with their hands. The parent remarked that she could really see a change with her child's readiness to do tummy time. Other parents discussed how much more tummy time was happening at home, making it clear that doing it in the Active Families programme was having a positive effect on behaviours outside of the learning setting.

- *Post-session snacks and social time*

Each session ended with some time for healthy snacks and drinks for both children and their adults. The snack time acted as a catalyst for chats amongst the group and further reiterated the 'sharing'-based nature of the sessions, as children ate and drank together. The aim of the project was not to provide nutritional information for families, yet this is a clear direction for the project's development. This would need to involve working in partnership with paediatric dietitians to offer support and advice for families, alongside the physical activity provision that Dance Network Association can offer.



Healthy snacks and social time

### Physical and Cognitive Development

Whilst social cohesion has been the main focus of this enquiry, activities that supported physical and cognitive development were the primary focus of the content of the sessions. Research suggests that dance and movement can support the health and wellbeing of those participating, and support feelings of relatedness and belonging when part of a group of this nature. It is not only the nature of how these activities are facilitated that is important, but indeed the growing physical and social confidence that children and adults assimilate from their participation that can contribute to social integration as well. The following table outlines the content of a typical session and some of the physical and cognitive development outcomes:

Content	Sample Physical and Cognitive Development Outcomes
Hello and Welcome Covering eyes and Waving hello	Growing awareness of constancy of people and things Supports trunk control and stability for those aged 6 months plus approx Development of imaginary thinking and copying Supports fine motor skills in fingers Development of the mature S curve of the spine
Pizza Massage	Enhances posture and coordination Develops responsiveness to touch and pleasure Development of imaginary thinking and copying Supports fine motor skills in fingers
Reaching high and low Floor games – spinning on tummy; spider fingers	Moving through movement patterns such as upper and lower quadrants (homologous); using limbs on the same side (homolateral); using limbs on opposite sides of the body (contralateral); understanding length of body

reaching and crawling; locomoting around the space – crawling	(head to toes) Promotes cervical and lumbar stability and neck strength Enhances posture and coordination Helps heel to coccyx alignment
'I have ten fingers' rhyme Fingers	Supports fine motor skills in hands Group unison
Moving around the space – crawl; shuffle; balance; big steps; little steps often on movement circuit with props Meeting others – shaking hands; touching tummies and noses	Development of locomotion, using different body parts to move through space Relating to props Balance away from the floor (vestibular system: spinning, rocking, sliding, swinging) Promotes and supplies the brain with information regarding body's position in space (proprioception) Turn-taking Reaching an object and understanding cause and effect Sensations of giving and receiving touch with others Helps the development of the mature S curve of the spine
Elastic rhyme and actions Feathers Bubbles	Stimulates horizontal eye tracking Hand-eye coordination Helps hands open from grasp Reaching, belly crawling, crawling Following instructions and the results of that Large group cooperation
Covering eyes and waving goodbye	Growing awareness of constancy of people and things Development of imaginary thinking and copying Supports fine motor skills in fingers Development of the mature S curve of the spine and trunk control

### *Developments in Physical and Social Confidence*

Families were observed for the duration of the project to evaluate the progression of physical and cognitive development in relation to the activities that were part of the sessions. Short focus group interviews were also carried out at the end of the project with parents and examined alongside the artists' reflective journals about the practice and the participants' development over the 10 week period.

Physical literacy was a clear development amongst the children during this project, in terms of the movement skills and knowledge that they assimilated. This was achieved through the repetition of activities and building of familiar structures for the children and adults to hook into each week. As the weeks progressed, Emily could see the children working out the rules of the game by anticipating actions, bringing together their verbal and physical communication skills. For example in the hello and goodbye games which began and ended each session, Zahara started by watching the artists speak and do hand actions. Week by week, she would join in, building her confidence through familiarity, until by the final weeks, she would be doing the actions before starting the

session, happily speaking and joining in as Louise led the activity with the whole group. The familiarity of people and the value of saying hello was reiterated by children, with Lalit often bounding into the space and shaking hands with Louise to say hello.

Repetition was a key tool to build an environment for physical and social confidence to flourish. The tool of repetition enabled the children to create memories and draw on those in subsequent sessions. As a result children were better able to remember and use their memory from week to week to complete activities. In addition we saw their ability to attend to movement actions in detail and focus in more effectively, as their familiarity grew and confidence in their own abilities was realised.

The development of physical literacy was very clear for Zahara's mother to see from a number of perspectives. During the bubble activity, Zahara's focus and attention really refined. She was happy to be lifted by Emily to reach the higher bubbles, using her feet to push against Emily's abdomen and reach forward into space to catch the bubbles gently on her fingers. Here, we saw increased trunk control, a real sense of how to stabilise her torso using the core muscles and reach forward with support. We also saw her being able to control the vigour of her movements as she understood the more gentle response to the bubbles would enable her to catch them and not pop them. Zahara was able to utilise different scales of effort to achieve what was required, suggesting an increased awareness of her own power. She learnt these things by doing, and that now translated into cognitive decision making about how to actively do something. This greater refinement in her physical skills and understanding of how her body moves was something which the mother translated into confidence. Zahara's physical literacy developed in the actual physical actions she would do too; for example her mother noted that she would spend a lot of time on her tummy at home, use her tiptoes to walk and play with her balance more, roll around on the floor and try out more and more precarious balances as her body confidence grew.



Developing physical literacy and confidence

Other parents noted that the children would more readily leave them, especially as the structure of the session became more familiar. This dovetailed with the natural maturation process of the child physically moving away from the parent and finding more independence. The sessions provided a safe space for that natural developmental cycle to occur. By moving away from parents, many reflected that their children were more aware of others sharing the space with them, and could see that their spatial awareness was developing. A sense of consideration for others and their space was beginning to be visible by the end of the sessions. Zahara's mother explained that she could see her child feeling more and more a part of this community. She would smile and wave at others as she arrived, there was an ease in her body in being in the space.

Such ease was echoed by other children too. Sajal would often struggle more in the structured sections of the classes. Yet given an opportunity for free dancing, he moved without inhibition and clearly found pleasure in moving his way, without rules. Here his physical literacy shone, combining big expansive movement with the development of fine motor skills in his fingers and hands. Thus, the opportunity for children to move within physical games, play and movement

activities **and** outside of those structures is vital, so that every preference can be catered for at some point and the environment which allows confidence to flourish can be adapted for each child. All parents explained how much they valued the open nature of the classes where Louise would really be clear that there was no right or wrong response from the participants in their movement decisions. This value which underpins Louise's practice is vital in offering autonomy to those taking part and helping confidence to emerge.

### *Enjoyment and Fun*

A key value underpinning the work was Louise's emphasis on fun by fostering curiosity and maintaining freedom for the children and adults to explore. Louise reflects that often this is hardest for the parents and carers to enable with their children. Often they will hide behind their child because of their own insecurities in moving themselves, or they will 'do' the movement for their child, thereby hindering the child's natural tendencies to explore for themselves. By offering open-ended tasks and ensuring that there was no emphasis on right and wrong, the spirit of exploration was enabled by the artists, often by modelling the behaviour or through instruction. By emphasising curiosity through the classes, Zahara's mother reflected that away from classes, Zahara was keen to play near steps, pushing at the boundaries of safety and taking increasing physical risks with her body and with props she would play with. Her mother went on to explain that other adults have seen this increased risk taking in Zahara's activity and commented how confident and happy she seemed in being able to be curious and explore freely.



Modelling curiosity

Many non-verbal indicators suggest that the children and adults enjoyed the project very much, not least because of their continued return to the programme each week. Simple gestures such as smiling, being engaged with the activity, laughing, sharing, helping and supporting amongst the children, adults and artists suggested that enjoyment and fun were at the heart of the Active Families sessions. Other emotions were evident too and space was given for children to enter the space in any mood. By and large parents and carers persevered with their child and any reticence would lift. Equally, there was space for the adult participants to take their child home if it wasn't working that day. This process of open access and doing what needs to be done, is accepting of the normality of our lives, and presents to the community a shared and understanding experience; certainly there is tolerance of difference in this group and that made for a happy and conducive environment for the participants to learn.

### *Communication*

Communication amongst the group was a key feature in supporting cohesion amongst the participants. In a group where English was not the mother tongue of many of the families, Louise and Emily relied heavily on dancing and physicalizing themselves. At the start of all sessions, Louise would talk briefly about the purposes of the programme and how physical time with a small child enhances development; theoretical contexts were interwoven throughout the teaching in order to provide reasonings as to why activities were included. Instructions were given clearly prior to the activity taking place so that parents knew what to expect and could best support their child, as well as the clear, direct and simple instructions of the actual activities too. Louise and Emily would use the British Sign Language action to 'stop', and over time the children would say and do that action and indeed stop what they were doing. The process of verbalising and physically doing reiterated the instruction to follow, making communication to the group easier from Louise's perspective, but also creating a shared and understood mode of communication for the group participants. The sharing and eating of food and drink at the end of the session was vital in reinforcing social bonds, especially so amongst the children. Many adults would help with giving children food and making sure adults got drinks and children chattered to each other whilst eating. The modes of communication were varied through the session and outside it, the sense of cohesion through these various modes of relating to one another, would suggest that the programme acted as a successful catalyst in bringing people together through dance.



## Conclusions

The aims of the Dance Network Association's early years provision have thoroughly been met through the Active Families project in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. A total of 31 families were encountered, widening awareness of dance and its role in healthful behaviours.

There is evidence to suggest that **these sessions provided an environment for families to come together and make new friendships**; indeed the project enabled existing friendships to be cemented further as friends brought friends to the classes. The case study of Zahara suggests her increasing boldness in dancing and her physical literacy developments outside of the class are resulting in strides in her physical confidence. She relates more easily to others as a result of the socialisation occurring in the sessions and the work in the Active Families project has enabled to begin to find a place in her local community. **Her developing physical literacy and social confidence evidences processes which will ensure she will be ready for school in three and a half years time.**

By drawing on established dance practice models from Pasch, Sherbourne and others, we have been able to carefully demonstrate that **this work positively impacts the physical and cognitive developmental benefits of our activity for early years participants**, and continue to reflect on that practice to ensure its currency and relevance for family populations in the borough. There is scope to develop **a toolkit for best practice for work with early years participants and their adults**, offering training for early years' practitioners and finding ways to work in partnership with other providers to ensure more families can reach this kind of offer. It makes sense to work towards offering a programme in less-well served wards within the borough, raising the aspirations of those living there, and creating a progressive programme of early years' dance activity which matches children's growing levels of commitment, development and experience.

The evidence of this project suggests that **dance can bring together groups of people of different ethnicities and backgrounds to connect and interact with other people**. Some participants may be quite isolated from services due to their economic status, or indeed they may be isolated because of the health conditions that they face. Some outputs from this project suggest that **dance has the ability to transcend such challenges and bring people together to feel emotionally, physically and mentally connected**. The artist has a significant role to play in this as they have the potential to interact and strongly influence the notions of social connectedness; in engaging with

dance, participants' confidence in moving and interacting can grow, one's sense of connectedness may feel more rooted and so overall health and wellbeing can flourish too. Community dance practice lends itself strongly to the principles of social connectedness as suggested by People Dancing (2013):

Community dance is not confined to any specific type of dance and is concerned with engaging people creatively and safely in a dance style, or exploring dance ideas and forms of their own. It can involve creating dance for performance, and is centrally concerned with the experience of dancing and the process of making dance, and includes many ways of 'participating' - learning, making, performing, watching and talking about dance.

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