What Difference Does a Swim Make?
Lochee Children’s Experiences of Family Splash

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Overview

This briefing report summarises the key findings of a qualitative study which sought to explore the perspectives and experiences of families who participated in the Lochee Family Splash. This briefing reports on the emergent findings arising from the analysis of ‘research conversations’ with 27 children who participated in the Lochee Family Splash.

Key Points

Children shared a wide range of views on their participative experiences during Family Splash.

Children's research conversations were dominated by discussions of the social and emotional aspects of Family Splash.

Children shared a variety of common perspectives around the theme of ‘togetherness’. Being with others whether parents, siblings or friends emerged as the aspect that children most valued.

Many children talked about the positive emotions they experienced through being with families and friends. Being ‘happy together’ was identified as important.

Many children enthusiastically shared the ways in which their swimming abilities had developed during the sessions they attended. Children spoke with pride about the various things they could do (e.g. blow bubbles in the water, hold breath etc.) and exhibited a clear sense of achievement.

Children discussed a range of embodied emotions connected to swimming. For instance, they often shared that swimming made them feel ‘good’ or ‘happy’.

They also identified a range of physical states connected to swimming such as feeling ‘tired’, ‘thirsty’ or ‘hungry’.

Through the research conversations it was clear that the children we spoke to valued access to swimming. They also described a wide range of healthy physical activities they enjoyed doing or would like to engage in..

Some children were very clear in stating that some of the things they would like to do were not accessible due to cost considerations.

When asked about what kinds of things would be good in Lochee and what kinds of things would improve their lives children tended to respond in terms of the wider material needs of their families.
The Study

The data reported in this briefing are drawn from a wider study exploring the perspectives and experiences of families who participated in the Lochee Family Splash Initiative. This briefing report summarises the key findings arising from the analysis of the ‘research conversations’ conducted with the 27 children who participated in this study.

The aims of the ‘research conversations’ with children were to:

- Explore children’s experiences of the Family Splash initiative to identify what children understand to be good outcomes arising from their participation in the initiative
- Seek to explore the extent to which these self-identified outcomes connect with the GIRFEC wellbeing indicators
- Explore the nature of children’s participation in wider physical activities and their participation in these within their community
- Identify what children themselves consider would improve their everyday lives

Data were collected from 4 groups of children immediately following their Family Splash Session. From those children who attended these 4 sessions a total of 27 children aged 3 to 13 years participated in ‘research conversations’ structured to facilitate exploration of the study aims. The ‘draw and write technique’ was employed as a strategy to enable children’s participation. This technique was employed both as a means of data collection which allowed children to express and / or represent their thoughts and as a device to facilitate research conversations. The researchers engaged children in research conversations around a range of themed ‘draw and write activities’ designed to elicit relevant data. Children were able to move freely from one activity to another. The developmental age and stage of each child influenced the extent to which younger children expressed their views in writing with most children preferring to draw. Older children appeared more comfortable drawing than writing perhaps reflecting individual competencies. All children were however able to simultaneously articulate their views in conversation with the researchers.

Data were manually recorded in writing. Where possible, children’s own words were recorded. The data therefore represent abridged conversations. The researchers took the decision not to audio or video record the sessions. Given that many of these families perhaps already experience a level of formal surveillance the researchers felt that the use of recording equipment was not appropriate. Notes were transcribed and thematically analysed in relation to the study aims.

This study supported an approach to research which treats young people as competent reporters on their own lives (James et al., 1998; Christensen & James, 2000). Even the youngest children in this study were able to express their views on a range of relevant issues with considerable sophistication.
Findings

**Having Fun**

From ethnographic observation of the sessions it was very clear that the children enjoyed their Splash sessions. Most of the children articulated this enjoyment describing Splash as ‘fun’ or stating how much they liked swimming. Statements such as ‘I like swimming’, ‘It’s fun’, ‘I like coming’, ‘I have fun in the pool’, ‘I like coming here’, ‘Swimming is great’, ‘You get to have fun’, were common. Children discussed the fun they had in the pool and the fun they had afterwards in the activity room. In relation to this a few children talked about enjoying a variety of activities they had experienced in the activity room such as storytelling, eating healthy snacks, playing pool and so forth. Thus, children described how they enjoyed the entire experience of Family Splash – the swimming and the activities they engaged in afterwards.

**Being Happy and Being Together**

Children also described being and feeling happy at Splash. With a range of statements being made around happiness. For the most part however feeling happy was strongly connected to being together with other family members and many children spoke of this. Being together and being happy together with other family members or friends emerged as the most valued aspect of Splash for children. Discussions around togetherness were dominant within research conversations. Children discussed how they liked coming with parents and / or siblings and taking in part in Splash activities both and out of the pool with their families. In these conversations children emphasised how good they thought being together with their families and friends was. From the conversations held with children their lack of access to family activities out with the home could perhaps explain the very high value children placed on togetherness. It certainly seemed to be the case that for many of these children participation in family activities of this kind tended to be infrequent.

Whilst many children spoke about how being together and commented on how this made them feel happy, one five year old girl who described how she felt happy with her sister and her mum also spoke poignantly about her mother’s feelings. In discussing the fun they had together she also commented on her mum feeling happy at Splash stating, ‘My mum is happy.’ Although no other children discussed the emotional benefits of Splash to parents in such direct terms this comment illustrates that even very young children can recognise the benefits of participation to parents through monitoring their emotional states. This young girl was able to recognise and talk about being happy with her mum and Splash and enjoying being happy with her mum at Splash.

**Being with Friends and Making New Friends**

Some children did not attend Splash with their parent/s but instead came with their friends and their friend’s parent/s. These children talked about enjoying swimming and enjoying coming with their friends. Children also discussed making new friends and swimming and appeared to value meeting other children at Splash. One young girl (12) speaking about these issues stated, ‘I like meeting new
friends’ and another young boy (10) similarly commentated that he liked, ‘Making new friends.’ Other children talked about the new friends they had made.

**Developing New Skills**

Many children enthusiastically shared the ways in which their swimming abilities had developed during the sessions they attended and things they had physically achieved in the water. Children spoke with pride about the various things they could do and exhibited a clear sense of achievement around the new skills and competencies they had acquired through attending Splash. They discussed being able to do things such as ‘jump in the pool’, ‘paddle in the deep end’. One six year old boy very enthusiastically said, ‘I can swim, I can hold my breath. I can swim under the water and sit on the bottom. Another boy (7) stated, ‘I learned to swim underwater, I learned with armbands.’

It was very clear that accomplishments of these kinds were very important to the children and they were keen to communicate and share what they had learned to do. One young girl (under 5) talked about how her brother had helped her to improve in the water. She discussed how she used to be scared in the swimming pool and talked about how she was no longer scared because her brother had helped her to overcome her fear. This speaks to the ways in which Splash can provide opportunities for siblings to create positive supportive experiences with one another. For this particular brother and sister access to such experiences did not appear to be common due to financial barriers.

**Feeling Good**

In addition to enjoying swimming, having fun and being happy at swimming and with family and friends, children discussed a range of embodied emotions or sensations connected to swimming. For instance, they often shared that swimming made them feel ‘good’ or ‘happy’. Some children talked about other physical states they experienced and connected to swimming such as feeling ‘tired’, or ‘thirsty’ or ‘hungry’ after swimming. Observation of the children in the activities room after sessions certainly testifies to that the fact that most of the children appeared ravenous after swimming and the health snacks were quickly gobbled up. However, in their discussions of feeling thirsty, hungry and so forth it was interesting that children were very able to connect this to swimming and to communicate understanding around such phenomenon as physical activity and appetite.

**Physical Activities**

Without doubt the children who participated in research conversations valued their access to swimming although it has to be noted that access to structured physical activities which require to be paid for did not appear to the norm for this particular group of children (although a small number described going to dancing classes and so forth). Most children did however talk about a wide range of other physical activities that they liked to do in their day to day lives. It appeared that most of the children were engaged in some level of physical activity out with Splash.
Children discussed enjoying activities such as running, cycling, climbing trees, playing on their roller skates, playing football, using the outdoor gyms in parks and so forth. Most of the kinds of physical activities children engaged with appeared to be the kinds of children’s play that takes place within neighbourhoods and in parks. Children did speak about enjoying playing in parks and going to various parks with their friends. Parks were valued but children also commentated on park equipment that did not work properly.

Other frequently mentioned activities that children took part in were those that took place within the school curriculum. Other experiences of swimming tended to have occurred within this context although children also talked about being able to take part in football and tennis at school.

**Barriers to Physical Activities, Leisure and Recreational Facilities**

Some children were very clear in stating that some of the things they would like to do were not accessible due to cost considerations. One young girl (13) spoke about not being able to go to dancing because her mum had said it was too expensive. Others spoke about how it was good that swimming was free and discussed how other things cost money. One young boy (11) discussed how you needed money for some things but not for others. The distinction this boy made was related to his experience of access to sports and other activities through school. He described things at school as being free but clearly articulated that most things out with school were not free.

There were a range of things that children described wanting to be able to participate in such as dancing, learning to play rugby, horse riding, more swimming and so on. A couple of children had extensive ‘wish-lists’ of things they would like to be able to take part in and others talked about things they used to be able to do but no longer could either because it was no longer freely available (e.g. trampolining at Camperdown Park) or because it was costing too much (e.g. dancing).

**Improving Life**

Through their discussions children did implicitly highlight that they would like access to leisure and recreation but understood the barriers to access as largely financial. However, when asked about what kinds of things would be good in Lochee and what kinds of things would improve their lives children tended to respond in terms of the wider material needs of their families. Here, housing emerged as an issue. One young boy (11) spoke about how he would like a bigger house so he could have his own bed in his own room. This boy talked about how he slept on the couch. Other material needs such as having new trainers or having quite modest possessions such as a bike that works properly were also mentioned.
**Linking to the GIRFEC Wellbeing Indicators**

There is evidence that Family Splash enhances the wellbeing of children across several domains and these are mapped out in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Safe</th>
<th>While there was little direct evidence that Family Splash contributes to this domain there is evidence that children consider Family Splash to be a safe place to be</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthy</td>
<td>Children are accessing and participating in a healthy physical activity, learning about healthy eating and a range of other healthy behaviours through their participation. However, analysis of the children’s research conversations clearly indicates that children consider the social and emotional aspects of their participation to be the most important to them. In this sense, Family Splash can be seen as contributing to children’s mental health in quite significant ways through providing a space for families to enjoy spending quality time together having fun. The opportunity to build friendships is also relevant here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achieving</td>
<td>The children clearly derived a sense of achievement and pride through what they learned at Family and Splash. They were developing new skills and competencies and there appeared to be benefits to their confidence and self-esteem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurtured</td>
<td>Family Splash creates and environment which facilitates a space in which the parent-child relationship can be strengthened. Although not all children came with their parent/s Family Splash provides a mechanism for the strengthening and development of a variety of relationships including friendships. Family Splash is a nurturing environment for children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Children valued having access to recreation and sport. Family Splash clearly contributes to this and to providing opportunities for children to lead active, healthy lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respected</td>
<td>Children’s views have been sought on their participation in Family Splash. Seeking their views on such issues and reflecting these views back to decision makers and policy makers allows children’s voices to be heard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>Some of the children spoke to ways in which in which they as siblings helped younger brothers or sisters with their swimming or discussed they ways in which they were helped by siblings. Family Splash contributes to the ways in which children can take active responsibility for others and develop their sense of their role within their families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Included</td>
<td>Family Splash provides access to sport and recreation which may otherwise be inaccessible to the children who participate. Children clearly identified that they families faced considerable financial inequalities in relation to access to sports, recreation and cultural facilities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What difference Does a Swim Make?

Family Splash creates a space where children can spend quality time with their parent/s. Being together with parent/s and/or with friends was identified by children as being what they valued most about Family Splash. Most of the children who participated in this research study came from challenging family backgrounds and were affected by issues connected to poverty as well as other forms of adversity. Family Splash appears to provide a space in the lives of these children and families where they can be together and enjoy each other’s company away from the stresses and strains of family life and the family home. Families are happy at Splash – they are happy together – and the importance that children placed on this cannot be understated.

Of course, Family Splash contributes to the wellbeing of children in ways that extend beyond the creation of space for families to enjoy being together. Children are clearly accessing healthy activities through swimming and their participation in a range of activities such as healthy eating, storytelling and so forth in the activity room afterwards. Their participation in these activities clearly contributes to their overall physical health but it also contributes to their sense of self and their feelings of confidence, pride and achievement. These children are developing skills and competencies that they are proud of and which is contributing to their sense of self-worth.

Many of the children spoke eloquently about the financial barriers to sports, culture and recreation they faced in their daily lives. Whilst these children were certainly not inactive (they talked a lot about playing in and around their homes and communities) they were able to discuss the different kinds of activities they could not participate in due to lack of money within the family. Although this was not the case for all children for the majority accessing opportunities such as swimming seemed unusual. Clearly Family Splash contributes to these children feeling able to participate and be included in the communities in which they live.

References