

Flying Seagull Project: Joining the Laugh-olution



All they're after is your laughter



The Flying Seagull Project and Wagon Stage, Summer 2015

The Flying Seagull Project is a troupe of entertainers engaging children and adults in art, music, craft, circus skills, games and performances in educational, recreational and residential settings nationally and internationally. A registered charity, they work in a range of sites from children's hospitals, orphanages and refugee camps, to poor rural communities and old people's care homes, to festivals and parties. This means that the Flying Seagull Project encounters children and adults who are facing serious challenges and trauma and living in contexts of significant deprivation, uncertainty and threat, as well as those who make up the diverse mainstream of society. Many of the Flying Seagulls are in full-time employment elsewhere, and all give their skills and time as volunteers.

Laughter is at the heart of what the Flying Seagull Project does – they say 'all we're after is your laughter'. They make laughter a right, saying 'we believe that it is everyone's, man, woman or child's, right to put aside the cares of life and smile for a while'. For the Flying Seagull Project this persistent pursuit of laughter is a 'laugh-olution'.

Laughter may seem a frivolity, an additional extra rather than an essential ingredient, especially when thinking about services provided by public and charitable agencies to children and families. Yet the Flying Seagull Project is 'serious about having fun' and this seriousness is supported by current research that shows that laughter is an important feature of social life and social functioning and an important factor in our wellbeing.

Scope of the report

This report offers an account of the work of the Flying Seagull Project and audience responses to it, and considers this in the context of current research and in relation to national and international policy priorities. It makes use of documentary evidence, existing research and policy literature, observations of the Flying Seagull Project's practice, and audience response cards completed by children and adults over two days at a charity festival in the north of England during summer 2015.

Public Service Academy

This report has been prepared by the Public Service Academy, an initiative of the College of Social Sciences at the University of Birmingham which brings the latest academic scholarship and research expertise to partnership working with organisations engaged in designing and delivering public services. This report has been written by Professor Deborah Youdell, Department of Education and Social Justice, School of Education, College of Social Science, University of Birmingham.

Long Live the Laugh



The Flying Seagull Project Ethos

- 1 We believe everyone has the right to laugh and enjoy their life, no matter what their financial, physical, psychological or societal situation.
- 2 We believe every child should have the right to play freely without risk or threat.
- 3 We believe play, creativity and laughter is essential to a child's development and therefore to the community as a whole.
- 4 We believe that energy and positivity are contagious and intend to spread them as far and wide as possible.
- 5 We believe that everyone, everywhere is entitled to communicate and to be heard in whatever way is possible, and we hope to give people voices wherever we go.
- 6 We believe that the purpose of learning something is so that you can offer to share it with someone else, somewhere else, sometime else.
- 7 We believe that a stranger is a member of the family you just haven't met yet.
- 8 We believe the first point of contact with anyone should be a smile.
- 9 We believe in FUN as a philosophy.
- 10 We believe in you!

Summary of key findings: laughterivism for the future

- 1 The Flying Seagull Project offers outstanding experiences to the children and adults who participate.
- 2 The Flying Seagulls' approach is grounded in the strong tradition of participatory arts, music, circus and clowning.
- 3 The Flying Seagulls' work reflects powerful current evidence from social science, neuroscience and biochemistry of the importance of laughter, collective physical play and trusting relationships for building social bonds, resolving conflict, creating cohesive communities, developing resilience and securing personal and social wellbeing.
 - The laughter that is continually evoked makes a significant contribution to developing social bond and wellbeing.
 - The freely chosen, collective, physical play that is at the heart of many activities makes a significant contribution to health and wellbeing.
 - The relationships of trust and reciprocity developed facilitate learning and develop resilience.
 - The principles and practices of inclusion that underpin the work ensure that participation cuts across ages, capacities and backgrounds.
 - The participatory and inclusive approach supports belonging and self-esteem and makes everyone a member of the Flying Seagull community.
- 4 The work of the Flying Seagull Project makes a real contribution to wellbeing, a major priority of the UK Government and governments internationally.
- 5 The work contributes to the push for increased physical activity, and engages people in the 'right' kind of physical activity according to the research evidence.
- 6 Through its contribution to wellbeing, resilience, community cohesion, and social bonding, the work of the Flying Seagull Project demonstrates the effectiveness of being in the present as a mechanism for securing long-term wellbeing.
- 7 Through its work in contexts of extreme deprivation and crisis, such as orphanages and refugee camps, the Flying Seagull Project contributes to the global community's fulfillment of its responsibilities under the Declaration and Convention on the Rights of the Child to secure not just survival but also play and creative opportunities for all children.
- 8 The work of the Flying Seagull Project can have lasting impact. Investment in the work is an investment in children's and adults' wellbeing now and in their health, wellbeing, resilience and relationships in the future.

The importance of feeling good

There are long histories of collective music, dance, theatre and art, as well as fools, jesters, street performers, circus and clowning across many cultures. These long histories have in common the ways that these practices draw participants into the present moment, create experiences of collectivity, engender feelings of vitality, provoke laughter, and allow social boundaries to be blurred and uncomfortable truths to be acknowledged.

The desire to create laughter, energy, fun, happiness and joy is a repeated refrain in the Flying Seagulls' accounts of their own practice. These feelings and experiences are at the heart of current global policy concerns with wellbeing and are increasingly being recognized as having important long-term benefits.

Wellbeing

The UK National Wellbeing Programme (Cabinet Office 2010), launched by Prime Minister David Cameron in 2010, brings together economic prosperity, community cohesion and personal life satisfaction under the umbrella of wellbeing and the 'National Wellbeing Wheel' measures personal wellbeing in terms of feelings of satisfaction, worthwhileness, happiness and the absence of anxiety. Education, the environment, personal finance, health, and in turn physical activity, are all seen as contributing to wellbeing.

In the context of concerns about children's and young people's declining participation in physical activity, the UK government has issued physical activity guidelines for children and young people (Department of Health 2011), and Public Health England (2013) has reported on the benefits of healthy behavior, in particular physical activity, for children's wellbeing. Physical activity is said to be associated with 'improved concentration levels'; 'positive social behavior'; 'feeling liked'; 'lower levels of anxiety and depression'; 'being happier with their appearance'; and 'higher levels of self-esteem, happiness and satisfaction with their lives' (PHE, 2013: 7). The research underpinning the report offers important nuances to this overall picture: that moderate intensity physical activity is as good or even better than high intensity physical activity (Parfitt 2009); physical activity is more beneficial when it is undertaken in medium sized groups

(Fedewa and Ahn 2011), when it is convivial (Fedewa and Ahn 2011), and when it is chosen by and opted into by children and young people (Holder 2009) – taken together, social physical play is supported by this research evidence.

The PHE report and the research that it draws on do not identify the physiological mechanisms through which particular sorts of participation in particular sorts of physical activity benefit wellbeing. The emphasis on sociality, enjoyment and choice suggest that social and emotional factors as well as physiological influences are at play. This means that activities that provoke jubilation, not anxiety – and the distinct hormones that are part of these – will do most for children's and young people's wellbeing (Lindley and Youdell 2016).

Laughter

Our intuition and experience tell us that laughing is a good thing, and social research confirms the role that laughter plays in creating and sustaining social bonds as well as social boundaries and in making us feel good.

Neuroscience identifies two distinct types of laughter – voluntary laughter which plays an important part in communication, and involuntary laughter which is a more primitive part of social interaction shared by many mammals and is important for creating and maintaining social bonds, regulating feelings, and making us feel better. The brain responds differently to these two forms of laughter and works hard to process the potential meaning of laughter – a skill developed during childhood and early adulthood (Scott 2013).

The release of endorphins during laughter contributes to the bonding effect of shared laughter. Endorphins are neuropeptides – opioids thought of popularly as 'happy' or 'feel good' hormones – that have a role in the management of pain and in building and maintaining relationships. Endorphins are released during grooming, gentle stroking, laughter and group participation in music, singing, dancing and playing games or sport. The social aspects of these activities are important to the levels of endorphin activation, indeed, synchronized activities see a large increase in endorphin activation. The physical exhaustion caused by emptying lungs and the exhaustion

of abdominal muscles that results from involuntary laughter also contribute to endorphin release (Dunbar 2012).

In psychoanalysis the idea of *jouissance* suggests the possibility of re-experiencing the joy that we experienced as infants before we understood ourselves and the rules and troubles of the social world. The uncontrollable belly laugh or the moment of forgetting ourselves as we are caught up in play can be seen as ways of reconnecting with this joy.

It is clear, then, that vitality, joy and laughter experienced in the present have beneficial effects that persist well into the future. They make important contributions to our capacity to make and maintain bonds, to develop sustained relationships, relieve stress and resolve conflict, and to social cohesion more widely. They are a significant part of our neural networks and the biochemistry of our brains. In short, they are essential ingredients of personal, community and societal wellbeing. Where funders and policy makers are concerned to invest scarce resources in activities that will have significant benefits in the future, investing in laughter makes sense.

The good of feelings

Feelings and their expression – joy, happiness, laughter – are central to the work of the Flying Seagull Project. The children and adults they work with consistently report the fun they had, how happy it made them feel, how brilliant the experience was, and how the children were enthralled. Images produced by children include smiling faces, heart shapes, flowers, rainbows, colour and movement – all symbols and representations associated with happiness, vitality and love.

Positive experiences, and especially experiences through which we learn and grow, are not necessarily singularly happy. Psychologists and psychoanalysts note that learning something new necessarily disrupts established ideas or ways of being, and can be unsettling or provoke fear or anger (Britzman 1998, Bion cited in Bibby 2011). Winnicott (cited in Bibby 2011) stresses that the learner must be 'held in mind' as they experience the new or unsettling, a 'holding' that demands the teacher be open

to the child and willing to be in relation with her/him. The challenge of the new, and the Flying Seagulls' consistent capacity and willingness to 'hold' the children with whom they work, becomes evident in the responses of some children. For instance, the child who wrote that she felt 'happy but found it hard', and the child who wrote that he was 'scared' but whose mum explained that while he was scared he also 'loved' his experience.



Children's response cards completed during and after performances at a charity festival in the north of England.

Adults also consistently report the happiness they felt and the fun they had, with festival-goers in the UK noting the nostalgia of being transported to their childhoods. Adults consistently report how much the children in their care enjoy participating and gain from the experience.

The children's meeting with The Flying Seagulls was spectacular. The Flying Seagulls rebuilt a new and unique world, where dreams come true, with the kids. Every meeting, every game helped the children to achieve an object and to develop an ability. The Flying Seagulls had been, step by step, friends, teachers and psychologists and they shared parts of their knowledge, of their dreams, and so the kids could discover the beauty of their souls. I assisted one of Ash's shows and I was the only teacher with 200 children. Being on my own, I couldn't take control, but Ash's charming spirit made them feel good and made them unchain their hearts. The Flying Seagulls, not only changed the teachers' lives, but also changed the lives of all the children around them, spreading positive vibes, hope, achieved dreams and self-confidence. Warm regards – teacher, Romania

Playing together

The Flying Seagulls' engagements with the children and adults in their audiences are invariably playful, energetic and physical, inviting everyone to join in as they can.

The Compendium of Forgotten Games and Circus Skills Workshop are examples of the participatory, collective, inclusive, and hilariously fun nature of the physical activities that the Flying Seagull Project draws its audiences into.

The Compendium of Forgotten Games

In the Compendium of Forgotten Games the Seagulls remember the games that we used to play and have forgotten, and get everyone to remember and play them again. The games that the Seagull 'Games Teacher' introduces are structured and governed by simple rules so that everyone knows where they are supposed to be and what they are supposed to do. These games are free and easy, there is competition, but the Seagulls' lead is lighthearted, and there are lots of winners and nothing is at

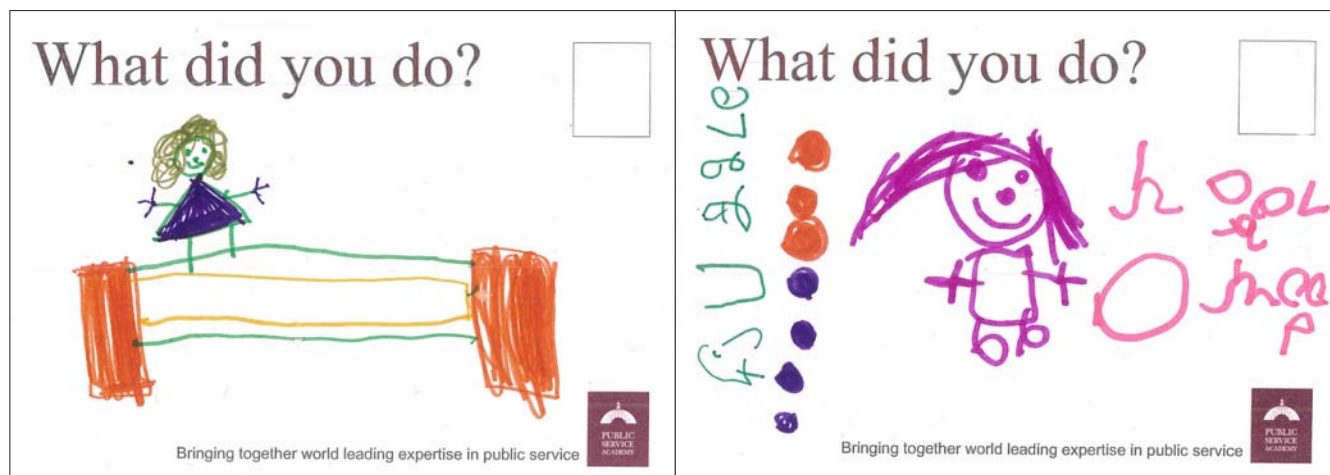
stake. Adults and children are invited to also remember games and take over the role of the Games Teacher.

One such game is Cat and Mouse in which people stand in a grid formation with their arms outstretched and fingers touching. Two are chosen to be 'cat' and 'mouse' and the cat chases the mouse through the corridors made by the human grid, which turns vertically and horizontally to the Games Teacher's shout, closing one set of corridors and opening others. Adults and children pant with exertion and laughter as they pursue each other (sometimes in unexpected pairing of previously unmet adults or adults and children) around the grid. A child chases his parent, a little sister chases her brother, a woman chases a man she hasn't met before. There is excitement, cheering, breathless laughter, and falling on the grass. Nobody and everyone is playing to win as they collapse laughing back into their place in the grid. Strangers come

together and move synchronously, touching fingers, running, laughing.

Circus Skills Workshops

Circus skills workshops involve children of all ages and adults in learning a variety of circus skills: walking the tightrope (see child's illustration left, drawn roughly to scale), working the hoola-hoop, juggling balls (see child's illustration right), and spinning plates. The Flying Seagulls offer demonstrations and guided practice as well as masses of encouragement, laughter and cheers when it goes wrong as well as when it goes well. Skills are developed a step at a time and everyone has some success. Children and adults participate together in a sizable session of physical activity demanding loose shoulders, strong stomachs, stamina, balance, as well as concentration, poise and perseverance. It is energizing, encouraging, frustrating and very funny.



The Compendium of Forgotten Games and Circus Skills Workshops enable intergenerational play which supports and extends relationships between children and their adult caregivers, and provide opportunities for children to experience safe and supportive relationships with both new adults and children of different ages. They also create a context in which adults can play and in which children can experience adults playing. The laughter; the physical exertion of the laughter and of the physical games themselves; the sociality and collectivity of the physical play and laughter; and the opting into the physical play, are all ingredients identified by research as crucial for creating and maintaining social bonds, learning about the way that laughter works, building social cohesion, and creating personal and collective wellbeing.

Relationships and resilience

The Flying Seagull Project is not a set of performances and the troupe are not a set of entertainers. The Flying Seagull Project offers experiences, encounters, feelings, skills and new becomings that are woven together and presented by people who, while certainly skilled performers and pedagogues, offer to enter into relationships of care with the children and adults they meet. We do not watch the Flying Seagull Project – we become Flying Seagulls.

We know that learning is enhanced, and challenges made possible, when the learner is in a relationship of care with their teacher.

In this relationship the learner, with her/his uncertainties or discomfort over the newness of what is being learnt, is held in mind by the teacher. These relations of care and this holding are evident in the relationships offered by and built by the Flying Seagulls. This is, after the revolutionary educator Paolo Freire (2004), a pedagogy of love.

Current research from the US National Scientific Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard (2015) is demonstrating the importance of relationships of care and trust and skill-building for the development of

resilience, a capacity developed throughout childhood that has been widely shown to be extremely important in navigating the day-to-day challenges of life as well as serious crises or trauma. The Flying Seagull Project creates encounters which open up many opportunities for relationships of care and trust to be made and experienced – between the crew and participants and between participants – for skills to be built, and, through this, for resilience to be developed.



Becoming Flying Seagull, Summer 2015

The power of participation

A gaggle of clowns-turned-pirates loiter on the stage in the big top, a golden glow illuminates where nets and ropes transform the plain stage into the deck of a ship. A rough old trunk sits in the middle of the deck, made a table by pirate paraphernalia. Hordes of children, from toddlers to early teens, fill the grass in front of the stage. Adults sit further back, some picnic. Many of these children and adults have paraded to the big top from the Flying Seagulls' Wagon Stage for a 'Pirate Take Over', they are already recruited to the game, they are already pirates. The big top is full of anticipation. One pirate turns to the children and begins to tell them about Cap'ain Bash, the wonderful and terrible pirate captain who was dragged to the bottom of the sea by Davy Jones and hasn't been seen since. She's sad he is gone, and hopeful and fearful that he will come back, and determined to keep everything ship-shape ready for his return. 'Are all you children going to join the pirates and work for Cap'ain Bash?!' Children pressed knee to knee on the grass, wide eyes, wide smiles, all ready to become pirates. 'YES!'. Then they must get on their feet and learn how to pirate – and those grown-ups need to pack up their picnics and get out of the way unless they want to get trampled. On instruction from the lead pirate, the crowd of children run, trip and charge across the grass – Port! Starboard! Forward! Aft! They scrub the decks, climb the rigging, and lay down starfish. And shout 'Aye Aye Captain!' on command. The big top is movement and laughter and lost breath. As the new crew sinks to the deck to rest, a knocking is heard, the lid of the trunk creaks open and a twisted and disheveled Cap'ain Bash unfolds from the confines of the box. Eyes are wide, mouths are wide, child-pirates are amazed. He inspects the new recruits and spins a scary (but not too scary) yarn about how he was caught, taken and escaped from Davy Jones' Locker. Excitement and tension spark between the assembled child-pirates, there is silence, all eyes are on Cap'ain Bash. Will their pirating be up to his standards, will the decks be scrubbed enough, will he keep them, or might he toss them to Davy Jones...?

The Flying Seagulls invite children into a ceaseless world of imagination, creativity and play. Children watch, listen, absorb and participate. They are immersed in the story created for them by the Seagulls and in the new pirate-children they are allowed to become. This is not an exchange between performers and audience, nor a straight forward moment of audience participation. Rather it is a reciprocal encounter in which we all become pirates.

What did you feel?



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After becoming Flying Seagull Pirate, Izzy drew many boats

Laughing with children and adults in crisis

The Flying Seagull Project undertakes the majority of its work in settings where children and adults are facing serious challenges or trauma – refugee camps, orphanages, hospitals, remote rural communities left behind by the economic and social changes of globalization. The Flying Seagulls have worked in Romania, Ghana, India, Jordan and, most recently, the refugee camps in Calais, France, and in total have worked with over 60,000 children and vulnerable communities worldwide. Ringleader Ash Perrin said of their work in Calais:

The message was simple, they are just kids, and regardless of everything they need to feel good. Despite differences of opinion on politics, economics and religion, we can all agree that the happiness of these children and all children worldwide matters.
(ITV Good Morning, 24 December 2015).

In extreme contexts where people are struggling to survive, arts, circus, music, dance and clowning may seem out of place. Yet the child's right to 'full opportunity for play and recreation' is set down in Principle 7 of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (UN 1959). This is elaborated by the international Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989) which asserts 'the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts' and States' responsibilities to 'respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and [responsibility to] encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.' (Article 6). So while the convention starts with the child's right to life, survival, and development (Article 6), it encompasses the full range of experience and opportunity. Furthermore, with specific reference to children who have

experienced crisis or trauma, including that resulting from persecution or war, Article 39 sets out that: '[governments] shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.'

There is, then, a clear mandate within the key enduring international agreements concerning the rights of children and our responsibilities towards them, for States and the global community they represent to secure for all children, including and perhaps especially those facing serious challenges and trauma, services which enable them to play, be creative, form new relationships, laugh, and experience joy.



Flying Seagull Project, Calais Refugee Camps, January 2016

Join the laugh-olution, become laughtervist

Preparing this report

This report has been prepared by the Public Service Academy, University of Birmingham. It draws on a range of sources, most notably the Flying Seagull Project's own documentation and literature, relevant published research and policy documents. It also draws on the author's experience of participating in the work of the Flying Seagull's Project and on audience feedback to the Flying Seagull Project. In particular, it makes use of 100 audience response cards designed and produced by the Public Service Academy and completed by audience members for the Flying Seagull Project during a charity festival in the north of England during summer 2015. The charity festival setting and audience offer a good opportunity for the Flying Seagull Project to collect audience responses. It is also a particular sort of setting and audience that is potentially quite different from others. Audiences take part and respond as active makers of practice and it's meaning, and they and their contexts and trajectories mediate the effects of their participation in the immediate and longer term. We cannot give a single or certain account of the impact of the Flying Seagull Project's work, but we can identify strong likely effects now and into the future. With thanks to all of the children and adults that shared their feedback and offered audience responses to the Flying Seagull Project. Thanks also to Professor Pat Thomson, University of Nottingham.

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What did you see?

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