

CASE STUDY: AUGUST 2020

What a difference a bubble makes: a free, safe haven for play



Islington's Timbuktu Adventure Playground – bubbles of children limited to 15

On the second day of the summer holidays, five boys turned up at the adventure playground in Islington where they had played together since the age of six, and were shocked to find themselves excluded. They had no idea that a booking system had been put in place and with nowhere else to go were vulnerable to exploitation on the street. Thanks to London Play's Neighbourhood Play Havens initiative, Islington Play Association was able to create additional sessions and invite them back as Lucy Benson, Head of Adventure Play, explains.

Islington Play Association (IPA) usually runs open access services on adventure playgrounds which are free for all children to attend. Open access means that children can come and go, they don't have to book. Older children who organise their own time often turn up to playgrounds to meet friends, eat something and play.

In responding to the pandemic, IPA is bound by government guidelines and public health systems to keep the whole community safe. To mitigate the risk of Covid-19 infection, we created bubbles of 15 children who play together on each adventure playground for a two-week period. Open access is not available. We used to see at least 200 individual children on each of our playgrounds over the course of the six-week holiday, now we can only see 45.

We knew that this would disappoint hundreds of children and families but tried our best to prioritise those most in need. This is difficult as there is so much need; in Islington 48 per cent of children live in poverty.

On the second day of the summer holidays, five boys arrived at one of our playgrounds. They had no idea that a booking system had been implemented. They have been attending the site since they were six years old and were stunned to find the playground was closed to them whilst other children played inside. They waited outside for half an hour in the hope that the rules might change, with faces full of disbelief and sadness.

One boy who turned up alone told a playworker that his father had been put in prison that week. The playworker spent time with him on the boundaries and suggested other services, but because he couldn't safely join the bubble his safe haven was closed to him. There is a risk that this isolated and vulnerable boy could be welcomed into other groups who offer him money, companionship and illegal dangerous work.



Locked out

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We realised that this age group of children, who use their local adventure playgrounds by casually dropping in and out were feeling locked out and let down. There were similar stories coming from another of our playgrounds, where children were sitting outside the boundary fence to talk with their friends who were inside (left).

By the end of our first week, we started planning for these children. We hoped to add a bubble for older children by opening one evening a week from 5.30pm to 7.30pm at both sites – but needed a budget to fund this work.

We contacted London Play at the beginning of week two of the summer holidays with the beginnings of a plan. London Play responded exceptionally swiftly to provide us with a budget that will pay for sessions. Thirty more children will be able to regularly use their playgrounds and will know that they have been seen and heard.

NOTE: London Play's [Neighbourhood Play Havens](#) project aims to ensure that adventurous play is within reach of those children and families who may otherwise be excluded – due to clinical vulnerabilities or capacity limits. Those who are most in need can experience a free weekly hour-long play session in their local safe space to play. Play workers are also receiving specialised training to help adapt their practice and enable them to support quality play experiences in the context of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The project is funded by the government's Coronavirus Community Support Fund, distributed by the National Lottery Community Fund.