

Buddy Scheme / Inclusive Play Evaluation Report



1. Executive Summary:

This evaluation aimed to assess the inclusivity and accessibility of the play environment, considering both physical and social aspects. The evaluation process included site visits, stakeholder interviews, and a review of accessibility guidelines.

- **Physical Environment:** The play environment at Flintshire Buddy Scheme sites demonstrates a strong commitment to inclusivity. The layout and design feature well-integrated accessibility elements, such as ramps, wide pathways, and sensory-rich play kits. Play equipment is diverse and caters to a wide range of physical abilities.
- **Social Inclusivity:** Flintshire Buddy Schemes fosters social interaction and collaborative play. Design elements encourage engagement between children of different abilities and backgrounds.
- **Sensory Considerations:** The play environment excels in accommodating various sensory needs. Thoughtful incorporation of auditory, visual, and tactile stimuli enhances the sensory experience for all children, including those with sensory sensitivities.
- **User Feedback:** Stakeholder feedback overwhelmingly emphasises the positive experiences children have at Flintshire Buddy Scheme. Parents, caregivers, and children appreciate the welcoming atmosphere and the opportunities for inclusive play.

2. Introduction: Flintshire Buddy Scheme

In our unwavering commitment to inclusivity, we introduced the Buddy Scheme many years ago—a transformative initiative designed for children and young people aged 5 to 17 with disabilities and / or additional needs. The Buddy Scheme serves as a supportive haven during the school holidays, where every child can engage in play with the freedom and independence they deserve.

3. Social Inclusivity Evaluation:

Social/communication skills are an important factor to play, so by meeting the needs of individuals Flintshire Playscheme have ensured that each child can access inclusive play.

Flintshire Playscheme have provided opportunities to develop social skills through the Buddy Scheme initially by having 1:1 support and using this to encourage a child to interact with other children, if possible, and upon evaluation has shown that many children who normally enjoy isolated play have also enjoyed and developed socially and formed new friendships. Feedback from this year has shown that children with social anxieties have improved their communication and developed friendships with both children and adults with the support from their buddy. Providing areas where children can socialise while taking part in play (Connah's Quay) such as the arts and craft area has become a safe and calming area children can attend; this creates

conversations about the activities and where children offer to help others who may be struggling. This promotes positive communication and friendships.

4. Sensory Considerations:

Play areas within Flintshire that are used for Playscheme are often set in play parks. These play areas provide sensory rich experiences for children through the availability of equipment such as swings – ziplines and basket, spinning roundabouts/bowls and climbing frames. The park equipment ensures that different sensory needs are catered for and enable children to choose how they want and prefer to play. Some play areas have in ground trampolines which is a hot spot for most children especially those with sensory needs and can gain much needed sensory feedback.

Some children within the Buddy Scheme have shown lack of interest in park equipment but still enjoy sensory toys. This year we expanded on the equipment we have for the children with sensory needs by providing visual and tactile stimuli. We provided buddy staff with boxes of magic sand and water beads which not only is an inclusive toy for those children with sensory needs but also a calming technique which was used for children who got over stimulated through play or began to show behaviours of concern. These boxes and availability of access to calming areas such as Connah's Quay sensory room, has shown to calm children down which led to continuation of play. Other equipment we provided this year were liquid timers, stretchy string, bubbles, spikey balls and different textured materials. With the variety of equipment, we were able to meet different individual sensory needs depending based on the information received from parents.

A select few children who attended playscheme sites found it difficult to leave their parents/caregivers and by providing and showing these children the "buddy boxes" playworkers were able to encourage and distract children enough to feel comfortable on site and stay until the end of the sessions. By providing these toys Flintshire Playscheme has not only provided inclusive play but also helped with different anxieties children displayed and did not have a buddy.

Some individuals also have sensory sensitivities so it is important that the Buddy Scheme can accommodate these children in any way we can. One parent had stated that their child struggles with the rain. If this child was on a site with no shelter, they would have found it difficult to attend sessions due to their sensory sensitivities, by providing areas of shelter within sites it broadens the availability of sessions for the child still being able to attend no matter the weather. Another child would often explain to playworkers that there was too much noise, and they were struggling. Playworkers had explained this to Buddy staff which enabled this child to join in with sensory play and attend the sensory room which reduced the noise the child was exposed to and made them more comfortable.

Most children love the day the waterslide is on their site; however, some children can find this overwhelming due to the noise and change of routine. Playworkers were able to provide inclusive play by adapting the waterslide, such as playworkers going down with children where they could sit on their bottom rather than slide down

tummies first, stopping the hose and buckets so children were not getting hit with the water and enabling buddy children who find waiting difficult to jump the queue on occasions.

5. Children / Parents Feedback:

Due to the complex individual needs of the children referred for the Buddy Scheme, it is important that each buddy has a good communicational relationship with the parents/caregivers and in return of this, buddies not only get feedback at the end of the scheme but at each session their child attends.

Parents and caregivers will give feedback to buddies and have stated that they are grateful that their child not only attends but has additional support. Most parents have explained that during the two-hour session their child attends, it gives them a sense of respite to either run errands that they may not be able to do with their child, or simply to sit down with a hot drink. Verbal feedback from this year has shown that the Buddy Scheme is still as needed as it has been over the years with parents stating that they feel confident to leave their children under the supervision of their buddies and are pleased with the way the children have been excited to come to each session. Parents have also stated that they will be signing their children up next year due to being happy with their experience this summer, this has been both verbal and written feedback; “he’s really enjoyed it with you”, “he said he would love to come tomorrow” and “will defo sign him up next year”.

During this year’s scheme at the Connah’s Quay play area, many parents have stayed with children to explore the different areas available. Parents have expressed how it is important to their children to have areas such as the sensory room where there is a quiet room to regulate themselves in order to get the most out of the scheme. Sensory and tactile equipment has also been a talking point with the parents, explaining that their children have enjoyed using these previously at home or in school and is a positive way to engage and enable the children to stay on site while their parents leave.

6. Strengths:

- Well-designed accessible pathways and ramps ensure that children of all abilities can navigate the space easily.
- The play equipment selection provides options for both individual and collaborative play, promoting social interaction.
- Inclusion of sensory-rich elements enhances the play experience and supports sensory development for all children.
- Positive user feedback underscores the success of the Buddy Scheme in creating an inclusive and welcoming environment.

7. Areas for Improvement:

- Enhancing the visibility of accessibility signage and symbols throughout the space to further promote inclusivity.
- Adding more seating options near play areas to encourage caregivers to engage with children during play.

- Expanding the range of tactile and auditory experiences available to cater to a broader spectrum of sensory preferences.

8. Conclusion:

The inclusive play evaluation of the Flintshire Buddy Scheme underscores the significance of creating play environments that cater to diverse abilities and backgrounds. The strengths identified in this evaluation demonstrate commendable efforts in this regard. By addressing the suggested areas for improvement, Flintshire Buddy Scheme can further elevate its inclusivity, ensuring that all children have the opportunity to play, learn, and thrive together.

11. Recommendations:

- Increase the number of sessions children can attend through recruitment of buddy staff
- Expand on the sensory equipment available for the children to be able to cater for additional sensory needs.
- Provide equipment such as ear defenders, to cater for children with auditory sensitivities
- Provide visual stimuli such as Makaton flashcards to expand and reinforce communication
- Play settings that have areas to provide sensory play as well as areas to self-regulate
- To create One Page Profiles on each child where parents can give detail about their child, what they enjoy, what their triggers are and how best to support them while they are at crisis point

12. Case studies:

During this year's scheme, there has been many children who by having a buddy, playworkers and parents were able to see a difference in the individual.

Child A – This child attended his first session and was becoming distressed at the thought of his parents leaving him. With the help of his buddy, we agreed that his parents could stay, and we all got involved in play together. This allowed the child to become more confident within the site and to be able to build a rapport with his buddy. During the summer this individual with the support of their buddy was able to grow in confidence, explore more of the play area and formed new friendships with other children. Each session the child attended, it took less time for them to adjust to their parents not being there and found their own routine and interests.

Child B – This child has been attending Play Scheme for a few years so already had his own routine, which has remained the same this year. Compared to previous years this child's behaviour has changed and during this years Scheme he displayed behaviours of concern. These behaviours, without

having a buddy could have resulted in other children getting hurt but due to always having someone with him who was able to distract him and be aware of triggers, the risk of others getting hurt was minimised. This child normally enjoyed isolated play but formed new friendships, and enjoyed interacting with others, especially during den building but needed the sensory room and sensory equipment to be able to self-regulate every so often.

Child C – This child has attended Play Scheme for a few years and has his own routine from the moment he arrives, however this year his interests have changed. Normally this child would go straight into the sensory room and spend most of the session in there with his buddy and other children. This year he spent most of his time in the community centre where he would sing and dance to the music. During his session he would run back and forth between the building at a fast pace and jump and put his hands out to the walls which gave him positive sensory feedback. His communication had developed over the 6 weeks, where he would request his favourite songs to the playworkers and sing all the words. This child has never displayed any conversational communication to his buddy over the years, however while feeling comfortable in the community centre, he got up and walked over to her and said “hello” while giving eye contact.

Child D – Parents of twin boys brought the children along to see if they wanted to join, however were very nervous and not part of the buddy scheme. A buddy took them all around the site, showing them the different areas and toys, they could play with, but they weren't comfortable staying. The buddy offered that if the parents want to come back at the end of the session, then we could try again for the last ten minutes. The parents brought back the children and the buddy had convinced one of the children to take part in the waterslide. This was a huge step for the child who asked to go on it again with the buddy. Parents were ecstatic that the child had taken part and were very grateful of the offer to come back at the end and to try again.