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The fun*damentals*

An Open University-Fullscope Charities collaboration,
funded by OU Knowledge Transfer Partnerships

“

I mean really we shouldn't fund anything for children
and young people that doesn't have really, doesn't
have some kind of mention of fun.

(funder 3)

”

Fun is widely viewed as important in work with children and young people. Charities, practitioners and children/young people consistently name 'fun' as key for education, social activities, and mental/physical health. And yet practitioners often find that funders are reluctant to support projects explicitly featuring 'fun!'

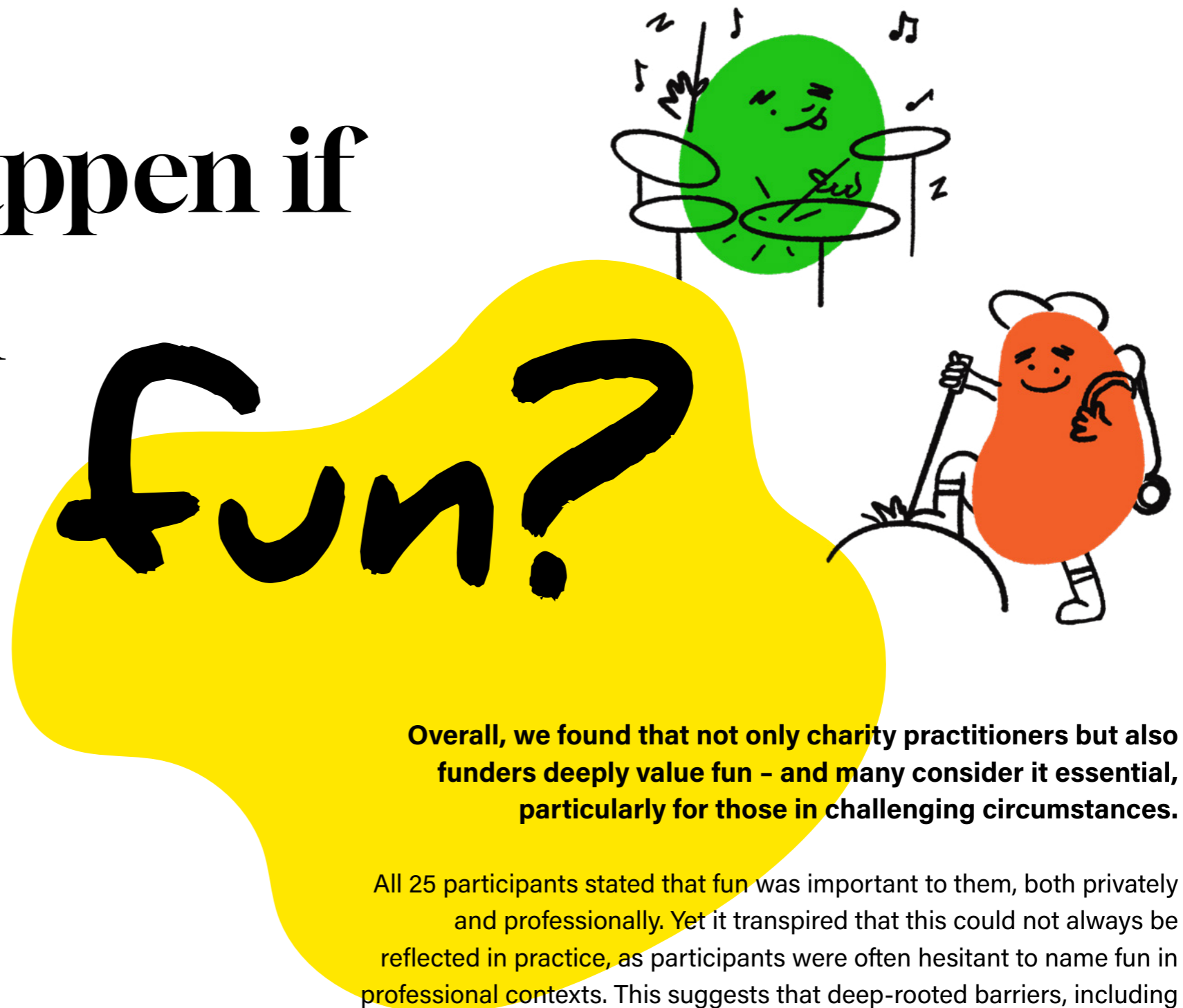
So we asked a simple, but provocative question..

What could happen if funders valued

fun?

The FUNdamentals study held wide-ranging conversations with 25 interviewees from 9 charities and 7 funders in England: The charity participants support children/young people facing significant challenges (e.g.; experience of trauma, poverty, the care system, the justice system, homelessness, SEND, young caring, and poor mental health), through counselling, dance, sports, creative writing, music, drama, days out, outdoor or community activities, and more.

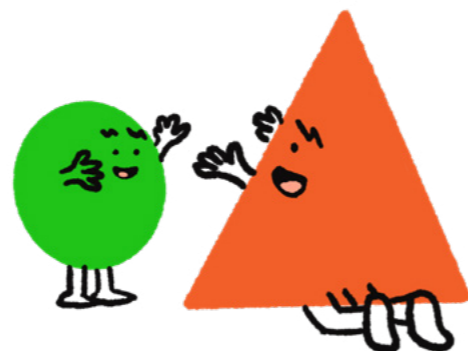
Funder participants included private foundations, the public sector, charities, and other diverse organisations. We explored their views of the role, value, and meaning of fun in their work supporting children/young people as well as in their own lives.



Overall, we found that not only charity practitioners but also funders deeply value fun - and many consider it essential, particularly for those in challenging circumstances.

All 25 participants stated that fun was important to them, both privately and professionally. Yet it transpired that this could not always be reflected in practice, as participants were often hesitant to name fun in professional contexts. This suggests that deep-rooted barriers, including society's suspicions about the idea of 'having fun', are preventing fun from being taken seriously. This finding indicates potential hidden alignments in the sector in how fun's value is perceived.

- **Fun is fundamental to working with children/young people.** Participants believed that without it, not much would be achieved. For children/young people in challenging circumstances, participants felt fun is more necessary, and more impactful, yet can be harder to access.
- **All charities, and most funders, observed that fun is transformative,** as it unlocks potential, improves wellbeing, promotes inclusion, secures relationships, and enables learning.
- **Participants indicated we are suffering a deficit of fun.** Recent political, cultural, and economic changes have led to a lack of opportunities, space, and affordability, particularly affecting teenagers. Some charities and funders suggested this could link to the UK's growing mental health crisis.
- **Funders generally DO value fun, but not explicitly.** Indeed, some participants (both funders and charities) described changing young people's descriptions of 'fun' and 'enjoyment' to terms adults are perceived to prefer, such as 'engagement' or 'wellbeing'.



“ **We've been thinking and talking a lot recently about how our society treats children and actually it's a pretty damning kind of indictment of our society if we can't fund fun for them...** (charity 1) ”

These key findings arose from six themes identified in the data analysis.

The Transformative Power of Fun

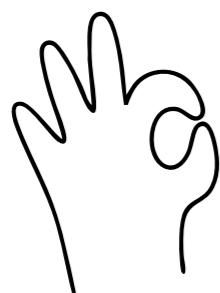
The Fun Deficit

Fear of Frivolity

Hidden hierarchies

The Fun Paradox

Shifting Power, Centering Youth



Opportunities:

- Some funders – despite public reluctance on 'fun – are genuinely interested in fun, joy, and enjoyment.
- 'Joy-centered' funds, preferably co-designed with children/young people, could be trialled, reviewed and the impact shared across the sector.
- Better aligning language with children/young people's voice, including fun, joy and care, could generate transparency and trust between children/young people, funders, and charities, potentially also amplifying children/young people's agency.
- At present, in England the national curriculum is under review and school refusal is at an all-time high. There may be space to encourage policymakers to explore how fun, joy, and enjoyment can enable access to the curriculum for all.

Barriers:

- Despite widespread quiet agreement on fun's importance, it is also seen as frivolous and placed in opposition to seriousness. Fun has an image problem.
- Charities (and many funders) are resource and time-poor, facing challenges in exploring new approaches, such as the value of fun in outcomes discourses.
- Fun is hard to define and quantify. It is deeply personal and is often characterized by process and environmental factors ('how') as opposed to outcomes ('what'), presenting challenges for those seeking to measure impact.
- Our funding systems, and society, are still infected by old-fashioned sensibilities, leading to judgements on who is 'worthy' of fun and what fun is allowed to look like.

Further exploration needed:

- **What does 'fun' mean to children/young people?** How can we define and measure fun, and its impact? Work with children/young people, practitioners and funders to explore what this may look like, and what value it might bring.
- **What's the right word?** Does 'fun' imply something that 'joy / enjoy' don't? Are 'joy'/'enjoy' acceptable where 'fun' is not? Given the effect of language on our society, and systems, is it worth exploring if there is a 'right' word?
- **Is there a link between the issues raised in 'the fun deficit' and the problems children/young people are facing on a wider scale?** Consider potential links with increasing unhappiness levels in childhood.



The Transformative Power of Fun:

Fun is vital to life; a key to unlocking potential, building relationships, promoting inclusion, improving wellness and knowing oneself, particularly in challenging circumstances.

Charities and funders recognised that fun's relational quality is key to building the trust required for "serious work" to happen. As one funder put it:



I find fun is intrinsically linked to having a culture where you can be yourself, let go and not have too much inhibition. So, I think those things are also linked to how safe you feel, when I say safe, psychologically safe, emotionally safe in that environment, in that organisation, in that context.

(funder 4)



Fun was considered fundamental to engagement, retention, and inclusion on children/young people programmes. When asked what would happen if fun was removed from their work one charity said;



X: I don't know if we'd have a programme, I dunno if we'd have a job. Yeah, I dunno if I'd want my job.

Y: our programme would just be really rubbish. It becomes something that people wouldn't self-elect to get involved in.... I guess young people who don't, where education doesn't work for them, but it's something that they have to attend...I just can't imagine that they would invest in any kind of relationship with us if there wasn't that kind of shared joy and fun. I think they'd just be like, 'nah'

X: "Literally our work wouldn't exist without it. The impact that it has wouldn't exist."

(charity 2)



The Fun Deficit:

15 years of fiscal cuts, curriculum shifts, and cultural changes have drained joy from shared spaces. Fun has become a 'luxury'. There's less money, space and time for fun for children/young people.

Charities and funders highlighted the decline of youth clubs as impacting teenagers particularly. As one funder commented children/young people have also lost this time and space for fun in formal education:



40 years ago there was probably a youth club on every corner and also other activities that you could do sports or arts or whatever. And now there's less of that and also there's a higher barrier....It feels like society, education, culture, politics has narrowed in terms of children and young people having the ability to at school have time to play or have time to build relationships with their teacher or with their peers because it's all now about academic learning post-primary school, secondary school. That's it just learning.

(funder 5)



It was noted that this wasn't always the case, with several references to The Children's Act and Every Child Matters policy (2003-2010). Every Child Matters included 'Enjoy and Achieve' as one of five key outcomes:



there was a real acknowledgement that 'enjoy' and 'achieve' are very intrinsically connected. If you're not enjoying, you won't achieve. You need to create enjoyment for achievement to happen... And enjoy was about fun. And it wasn't grubby or dirty, it was at the most senior level of education policy. And that was okay. (charity 7)



Fear of Frivolity:

The word 'fun' carries dismissive connotations and is often construed in the binary, in opposition to the seriousness of the work. In short, fun has an image problem.

Despite describing fun as transformational and essential, everyone shared negative connotations with the word fun and shied away from using it. Most construed questions on including fun within grantmaking as 'instead of', not 'as well as' indicating that 'fun' is almost subconsciously seen in opposition to 'seriousness' within our culture. As this funder indicates it's difficult to allay the fear that 'fun' could undermine the importance of their work:

“ Quite a lot of my job here is about overseeing the programmes and trying to make sure that we are distributing money in a way that makes sense, is fair, is reaching people who are disadvantaged. And when you talk about disadvantage and fun in the same sentence, yeah. It feels a bit of, feels like they're sort of polar opposites. (funder 6)



This becomes more challenging the more serious the work, which is ironically when fun is more needed. As this charity participant said:

“ I think if we started talking about bringing fun to trauma experienced children, people would be like, well that's nice, but yeah, we've got to worry about this first sort of thing. And I think there's definitely a contrast there between seriousness and fun. And trauma is seen as very serious and rightly so, but to battle trauma, fun is one of your weapons for sure. (charity 1)

Hidden Hierarchies:

Old-fashioned philanthropic values, alongside persistent social biases, shape ideas about who is deserving of fun and what forms that may take.

Notions of 'who is deserving' and 'who decides' are deeply embedded in society, perhaps increasingly so, due to the scarcity landscape, and widening equality gap. This is despite recent steps in the sector to address these notions. Both charities and funders mentioned that some types of fun are seen as more worthwhile than others. As one charity said:

“ Is fun from doing one activity more important? ...putting middle class bias towards activities which are seen as character building. So, it can be easier for example, to get funding to take young people on a hike, a climbing or a sailing experience, than bowling or to a trampoline park or the skate park. (charity 9)

Charities and funders noted that negative, deficit-infused language is used to describe problems, to raise funds. As this funder indicated, a '19th century Victorian' philanthropy model still pervades the sector:

“ ... that is largely the model that everyone uses, that we're all sort of trying to move away from a little bit, is to sort of identify problems, that you then apply money to solve. So, everything's in a deficit-based frame, a lot of the time. Whereas talking explicitly about fun and joy requires you to fund in a really asset-based, a really asset-based way and talk less about problems to be solved and more about the inherent capabilities of people and what people need to thrive. (funder 2)



The Fun Paradox:

Fun's power is deeply personal— but this makes it hard to quantify, 'rank', or squeeze into grantmaking boxes.

How fun was experienced and what people found fun varied enormously. For some it was feeling connected, for others time alone. Some valued being challenged, learning, and improving; others liked space to play, tease and be free. Fun can happen in the moment, or upon reflection. The feeling of having fun is what helps us feel safe enough to take constructive risks and explore elements of ourselves that lead to self-efficacy. This personal specificity is what makes it hard to define, measure, and track conventionally.



“ As soon as you said that I grinned because that to me is like fun, isn't it? Things that put a smile on your face that make you feel warm and happy. And actually, I think the act of what fun is could fundamentally be almost anything, but it's the feeling rather than a specific A to B, this is what gets you fun. It was something about that sort of generation of happiness, enjoyment, togetherness, connection. Yeah, that is fun for me. (funder 2) ”

Conversely, as another funder says, fun is then construed as something generic:

“ I dunno if it's because of the fun and joy sound just very generic and hard to bridge the gap between what they're doing and the impact they're trying to make. Maybe semantically, it feels like it is kind of transient that it will just kind of, oh, this momentarily fun, momentary, fun, momentary joy and it's not true. There's fun and there's joy and it will make a difference in the young people's lives. But in what way? (funder 1) ”



Shifting Power, Centering Youth:

When children/young people's voice is included, this humanises grant making, challenging the idea of 'worthiness' and driving change. Grantmakers' interest in 'joy' may pave the way for destigmatising fun and explicitly recognising its value.

Both charities and funders were upfront about the link between raising money to support children/young people and the commodification of them in doing so. However, where children/young people were directly involved with the funding from the outset this shifted. Some funders are starting to work more closely with children/young people to explore this through co-creating programmes. This funder commented on differences already seen:



“ one of the criteria that the (children/young people group) came up with for that programme was that they wanted to fund organisations that prioritise the joy and care of young people...We all reflected as a team. We were like, God, if we had designed that programme, we would never have put it that way. We would've never have included that criteria. (funder 2) ”

Funders observed that when children/young people describe experiences as fun, joy, or enjoyment, these are often changed (e.g., 'engagement' or 'wellbeing'), diminishing children/young people's agency. As one put it:

“ yeah, we have a youth voice and we embed youth voice. but then that's sort of taken and, not twisted, but sort of reshaped into what they think people want to hear. But actually, if there's more direct language it kind of gives more agency to the young people because whilst they're involving them, maybe they're talking about wanting to have fun...then we say 'well its positive wellbeing!' However, if we have more confidence that funders are happy to hear this more real language ... maybe that would increase youth voice, and give them more agency. and then that would have, going back to language, better outcomes for them, because they feel like what we're saying is valid. (funder 3) ”

What could happen if...?

This research asked, 'what could happen if funders valued fun?'. Some funders we spoke with reported it was hard to value fun in their professional contexts. However, we were interested to find that all funders valued fun themselves. This suggests an untapped opportunity, and that we should ask: 'what could happen if more funders valued fun explicitly?'. Here's what the research told us.

If more funders valued fun explicitly, charities could have the confidence to be more explicit about how they work, and about their beliefs in 'what works and how'. Our interviews suggest they would save time and energy if they no longer needed to justify including fun in funding bids. This extra capacity could be used to support more people and improve wellbeing within organisations.

If more funders valued fun explicitly, funders themselves could enjoy more transparent and trusting relationships with the charities they support. Adopting language that highlights assets when supporting those in need could start to shift the hidden hierarchies of 'who's deserving of what'. This could lead to a more equitable, and effective funding system.

Finally, if more funders valued fun explicitly, indications are that children and young people could feel more validated, leading to greater agency. If fun was made more accessible this might help them explore different skills, build healthy relationships and learn about themselves, with potential effects on happiness and engagement with society

About us

This research resulted from a partnership between the Open Universities (OU) RUMPUS team and Fullscope Consortium of Charities funded by the OU's Knowledge Transfer Voucher scheme. The project was given a favourable opinion after ethical review by The Open University (2024-0644). The data was collected via semi-structured interviews and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis in early 2025.

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What Now?

We ask funders, charities, policymakers and think tanks to act boldly to:

- **Validate the importance of fun/joy/enjoyment by explicitly referencing it in grant making language.**
- **Review Theories of Change and Impact Frameworks—does fun appear? If not, consider including it.**
- **Welcome applications that explicitly centre fun, Include flexible and non-ringfenced funding**
- **Consult directly with children/young people about what matters to them—and use their language.**
- **Assess fun, joy and enjoyment in education policy, including in secondary education.**



If you've taken a young person that's gone through extensive trauma and they've learned to have fun again, surely that's a positive outcome.

(charity 4)



Our FUNdamental values

Fun is integral to supporting children/young people. It is key to building relationships and trust, unlocking potential, enabling constructive risk-taking and learning. This is particularly true for those in challenging circumstances.

Without fun children/young people wouldn't engage in activities. Therefore, we include fun / enjoyment in the work we do / fund, not just for children/young people but also the adults supporting them. We view fun as a human need, not a luxury.

