



Summer Programme Impact Report



“It was the best trip I have ever been on, thank you for letting me experience this opportunity! My happiness can't be described with words - it was really that amazing!!”

- Nadya, age 11

An Introduction from the Trustees

It seems incredible that, a little over a year ago, we were writing the impact report after piloting our first ever residential project as Free to Be. That project provided a much needed break for 27 children, over five days and four nights, and was made possible by the hard work of 24 volunteers. This summer, the dedication of 55 volunteers allowed us to provide nearly five times that number of respite breaks for vulnerable children and young people, across five separate projects.

In all our work, we aim to reach and bring about meaningful change for children experiencing emotional, behavioural and social difficulties, as a result of family disadvantage, adverse life experiences and historical trauma. Whilst we can't remove all the challenges our children face, our projects are designed to build confidence, resilience and self esteem, equipping them with the emotional 'tools' to manage better at home, in school and with their friends.

We believe in childhood, muddy trainers, new challenges, self expression, and real human relationships. Our aim is to open up a sense of adventure, freedom and possibility for children who are struggling, whatever life's circumstances.

-From our website

Free to Be is still at an early stage of its development and growth, but we're really proud to share our progress with you at the end of our second summer. As well as the projects in this report, which focuses on our work over the July and August school holidays, we've also been busy during the rest of the year, running two terms of after-school Flourish Groups, a number of residencies during other school holidays and beginning to pilot our mentoring scheme, designed to offer ongoing support for the most vulnerable children who attend our residencies.

None of our projects would have been possible without the support, time and generosity of the many people who have worked with us over the last year. From individuals who have advised, shared their skills or donated, to companies who have provided generous gifts in kind and free services, to our amazing, now almost 100-strong pool of talented, committed volunteers. We're so grateful for your support,

Rachel, Mike & Madi



A summary of what we've achieved



118 children and young people attended our projects this summer

55 volunteers gave at least a week of their time to work alongside our children

99% of children reported positive indicators of improved self-esteem, confidence and resilience

100% of referrers providing feedback reported positive change in their children's emotional wellbeing and/or behaviour after the project



86% of children reported trying something they had previously not thought possible whilst they were with us this summer



This summer, we benefitted from over **5,750** volunteering hours

... that we had not had before, and was
was lots of flies but that did not stop
amazing and fun and probably the
that I would get to do that. As an
the trip, we went camping where with
how to make a fire all by myself.
was so cold but we were able to
and get some sleep. Another one on my

Is there anything we should change about
Free to Be?
No because it was
an incredible time
and anyone else who
will come will say
the same.



than we had not decided and
wanted to sleep



Pick a word to describe your holiday:
Incredible Really Good Okay
Not So Good Awful

Is there anything we should change about
Free to Be?

DO NOT burn the
toast

Although they were in different
groups as sisters they both come
back with the same experiences.
I've seen a change within my girl
and at the same time it gave me time
as a mother to spend more quality
time with my other two kids
So once again thanks

The Need

School holidays are a particularly challenging time for most of the families we work with. The vast majority of our children fall into the estimated three million children in the UK who are currently at risk of being left hungry during school holidays¹. Holiday hunger is a very real issue, but, of course, it is just one symptom of the impact of poverty on struggling families, especially when the daily support and structure of school falls away. The financial struggle to provide extra meals leaves many families surviving on poor quality, unhealthy food, unable to spare money for trips, leisure and play or even, often, to stick to normal routines. The resulting isolation and inactivity, often in cramped living conditions, increases parental stress and impacts on children's emotional wellbeing and behaviour. Where this adversity is combined with family issues such as parental ill health, addiction or bereavement, the picture becomes even more challenging.

Beyond the disadvantage created by poverty and adversity, most of our children also struggle with significant social, emotional or behavioural issues which impact deeply at school and home. Many struggle to manage complex thoughts and feelings, leaving them at risk of developing mental health difficulties as they grow. Others find making or keeping friends incredibly challenging, leaving them isolated and struggling with rejection. Some have low opinions of their own self worth which prevent them from trying new things, or taking risks. A significant proportion have experienced trauma or harm. Referrers told us the children they were most concerned about were those dealing with inter-linked issues of both poverty and social/emotional difficulties and it is these children that Free to Be exists to support. Staggeringly, over half the children we worked with this summer have been impacted so significantly by these adversities that they were at risk of, or had already experienced, school exclusion or had been referred to Social Services following concerns for their wellbeing in the last year.

Based on information from referrers and parents

The Need for our Projects



99% of children attending are from extremely disadvantaged backgrounds

including living with parents with addiction or mental health difficulties, facing homelessness or other housing instability, acting as young carers or living in poverty.



33% have a history of, or concerns around, potential abuse or neglect.



89% are experiencing emotional, social or behavioural issues.



51% are either, at risk of, or have experienced an exclusion from school, or have been the subject of a referral to Social Services in the last year.



74% would have no holiday this year without our support, or have no safe access to appropriate spaces to play at home.



For 17% of children, their break with us this summer was their first ever holiday.



¹ All Party Parliamentary Group on Hunger, Hungry Holidays, A report on hunger amongst children during school holidays, 2017

Case Studies

The following case studies contain excerpts from referral information to illustrate the challenges faced by some of the children on our projects this summer and a short account of the progress they made whilst with us. As with all children mentioned throughout this report, names and some personal details have been changed to protect identities.

“I went so many places and made so many new friends. Most of the places we went to it was my first time going!”

- Imogen, Age 11

Laura's parents have had a long history of police involvement as a result of drugs related offences and, historically, she has experienced a number of home raids because of this. Sometimes, as part of the raids, her possessions have been seized. Last year, both of Laura's parents were arrested and are currently serving prison sentences and she and her brother had to move to live with their grandmother. The move meant that Laura had to give up her pet dog, as well as dealing with all the other trauma brought about by the situation. Due to her grandmother's age and health, it was later determined that she was not able to look after Laura and her brother, so the children were then placed in foster care, but unfortunately the placement did not work and they were moved again, this time to a foster home outside of the borough. The move meant that the children had to change schools, moving away from their friends and adding to their loss. Both siblings desperately need the the chance to do something positive together this summer.

Laura and her brother attended one of our projects together this summer. We found ways throughout the week for them to have experiences together, including visiting a farm and going swimming. We placed Laura in a group with four other 8 and 9 year old girls who we thought she'd get on well with. She was quite shy and reserved at first, but as the group worked together more and bonded through shared activities, we saw a real improvement in her ability to get on with the other children and even lead the way. We assigned three volunteer Groups Leaders to the group, anticipating that Laura, and some of the other girls, may benefit from one to one time with adults to chat about how they were feeling. Laura spoke often about missing her parents and really benefitted from having this extra time and care. As she relaxed and became more comfortable on the project, Laura was able to engage more in imaginative play and 'be a child'. She loved spending time with animals, and would often visit the horses at our project site. She also loved splashing in the sea at the beach.



Tom's parents have had a volatile relationship throughout his life and his dad has served time in prison for drug offences. Tom's mum recently left dad due to domestic violence and he, his two siblings and his mother currently live with their grandmother in very cramped conditions after they fled the family home. Tom currently has no contact with his dad. While Tom has always displayed angry behaviour at school, this has escalated recently, resulting in a temporary exclusion as a result of bullying and aggressive behaviour. Tom was recently moved into another class, where he has several adults working with him to help him manage his emotions. He really struggles to make friends in school and school staff report that, on occasions he has brought in money and paid children to be his friend. Teachers are worried that Tom's clothes often don't fit him and he has been coming to school in shoes with holes in.

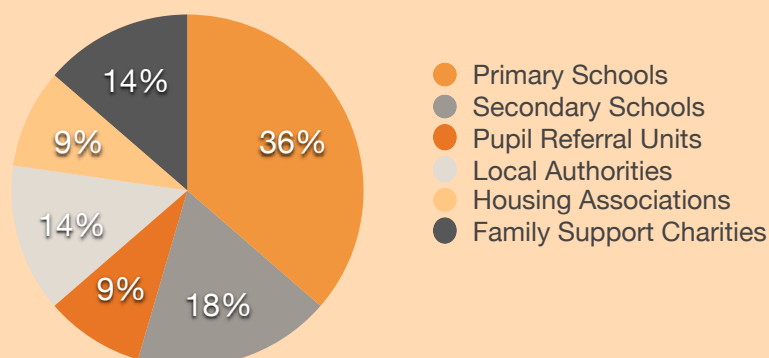
Given Tom's challenges with peers at school, our aim was to provide a safe space for him to build and practice social skills. We placed him in a group of children that were likely be welcoming and patient and worked with his Group Leaders to model positive, calm and supportive interactions. Tom got on well with the other boys and remarked several times about what great friends he had made. When there were upsets, Tom's Group Leaders facilitated conversations and supported the boys to overcome their disagreements, showing that, with work, relationships can endure ups and downs. We saw a real development in Tom over the week, from initially being very reactive and easily frustrated, to becoming more reflective and able to empathise. The concept of belonging meant a huge amount to him and he really lit up at shared achievements and experiences. Tom loved time with animals, which really brought out his gentle, nurturing side. He also learnt to swim under water during the week! To continue the work, we invited Tom on a second, smaller project later in the summer, where he benefitted from another week of intensive support. As we look to develop our work further by offering longer term, ongoing work, we hope to have the opportunity to provide more in depth support for Tom and other children like him.

Where our referrals came from:

Our referrals this summer came from 22 organisations based in 12 London boroughs, an increase from last summer, when we worked with children referred by 7 organisations, from 3 boroughs. One of our targets for 2017 has been to extend our geographical reach and to build relationships with other organisations supporting vulnerable children, in order to work with those who are most in need of our support. Of the boroughs we took children from this summer, seven fall within the ten most deprived in London, based on rankings from the 2015 Indices of Multiple Deprivation.



Half of our referrals were made by schools, with the other half reaching us from specialist education providers, social workers within local authorities, housing associations and charities working with vulnerable families.



Our Model

We've continued to review and develop our residential model over the last twelve months to ensure it is as accessible and effective as possible for the children it is designed to support. We have been grateful to the Anna Freud Centre and their research students for helping us in this task.

“An amazing part of volunteering with Free to Be is the community you become part of. I've met so many funny, passionate and positive people through this organisation.”

- Volunteer

The majority of children accessing our projects struggle with issues relating to low self-confidence and self-esteem, as evidenced in our referral information. For many, these issues are rooted in their own negative narratives about who they are and where they fit in the world, which have developed as a result of life experiences and interactions with others. Our projects can't remove these adversities from children's lives, but we can begin to change their narratives about themselves. We do this by providing opportunities for children to see themselves in a positive light and by surrounding them with emotionally attuned adults to support, encourage and notice achievements. Our core aim is to help children to feel special whilst they are with us and to create an atmosphere in which they feel they belong and are actively valued. Throughout our projects, children are regularly praised and volunteers work hard to recognise, name and nurture talents which perhaps haven't previously emerged in complex school and home lives.

Panic Zone

Learning becomes too difficult

Stretch Zone

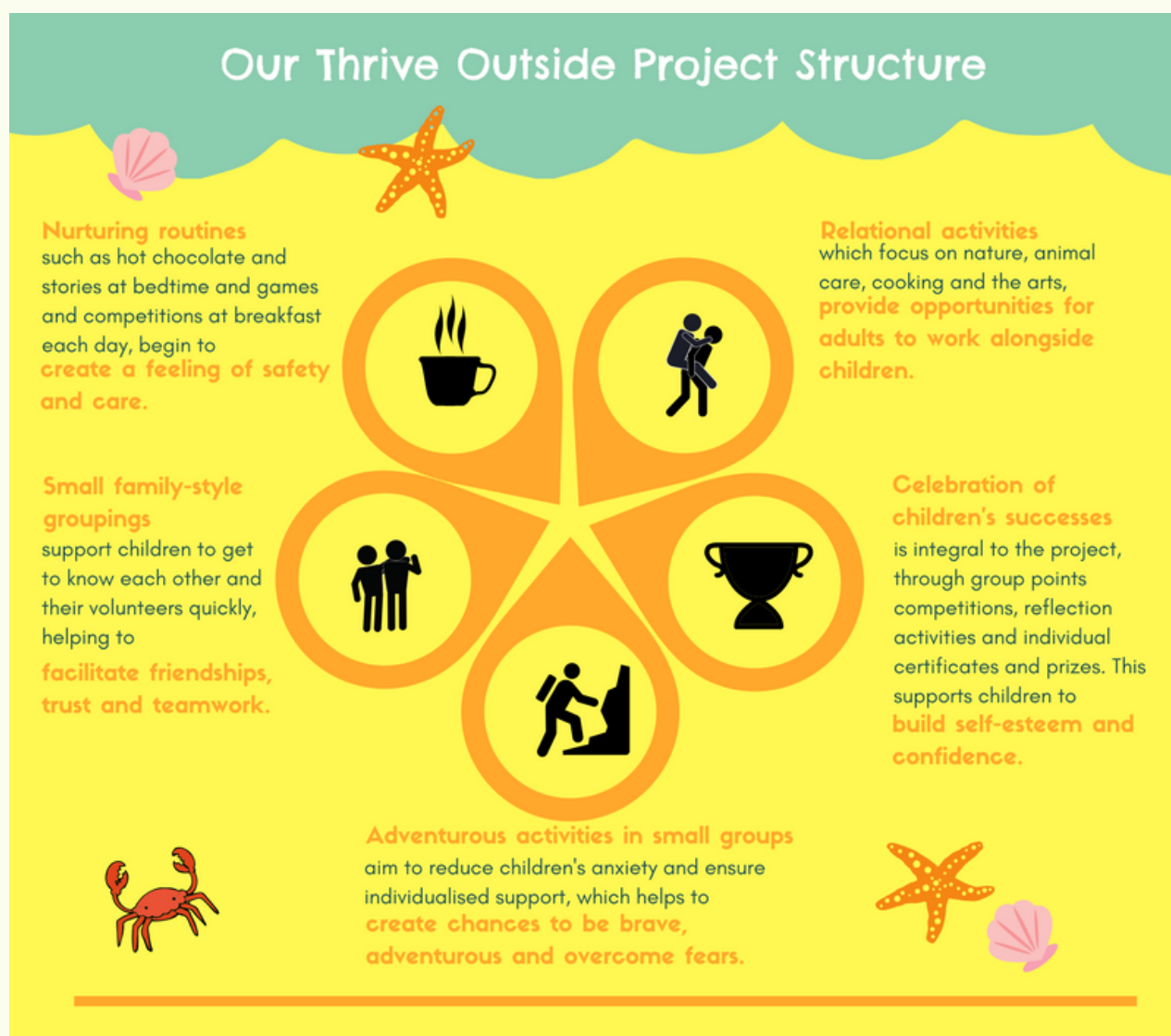
Where the most development happens - exciting but not terrifying

Comfort Zone

Known, safe and easy

We design our projects so that they include a mix of activities and experiences that are likely to be new and horizon expanding for the children attending. Many have anxieties around trying unfamiliar things, but we use the idea of the *stretch zone* to help them to try and succeed at new and adventurous activities. This creates opportunities for children to feel proud when worries are successfully overcome in a safe way and builds their capacities to deal with challenges elsewhere in life.





“I think the children take so much more from the projects than we realise. Having a positive adult constantly praising and recognising them has such a huge impact on their self-belief. As volunteers we're looking for positives and finding them every day - when they look after a younger child, help carry things or share their sweets with the group. These kids are so very special and in a busy house sometimes may not get the praise and recognition they deserve.”

- Volunteer

Our high adult to child ratios (over 1:2) mean that every child receives intensive support. On each of our projects this summer, children spent around 60 waking hours with the same, responsive, psychologically minded adults. In terms of time spent alongside the child, this equates to over a year of weekly clinic or home visits from social workers or other agencies.

Ultimately, our projects are designed to be fun, engaging, immersive and create a sense of 'belonging' - particularly for children who struggle to engage with more mainstream interventions. Children are supported to play, laugh, be a bit silly, experience adventure and feel included - sadly rare experiences for some. Their time with us stays with the children well beyond the project, creating lasting memories and new skills that can be drawn upon at times of challenge. All the children we worked with this summer left with a 'Star Award', which recognised their individual strengths and achievements on the project, and since they have returned home, we have written to every child and sent them some photos of their time with us.

Volunteer Support and Activities

Fifty five volunteers gave up their time to make our projects happen this summer, between them volunteering around 5,760 hours to Free to Be. To give an idea of the value of this, had we paid our volunteers at the UK Living Wage rate of £8.75 per hour, it would have cost us over £50,000. We're incredibly grateful for their time, compassion, hard work, patience and sense of fun.

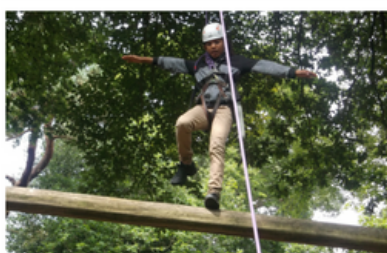
Here's what a few of them had to say:

"I really enjoyed seeing the children build positive relationships with other girls or boys their age - some of the children became really comfortable with being their true self and not trying to be the "older brother" or "difficult one". As the children arrived with no labels they were able to start a blank slate and I think this had a huge impact on the relationships they built during the week. Going back home knowing they are amazing, have learnt new skills and can build great friendships with people their age and adults too must have a great impact on their life. Learning new skills and building on these gives them a sense of achievement and purpose that perhaps at school they don't often get to feel, improving their confidence and sense of worth. I'm honoured to be part of such an amazing charity."

"Thank you so much for everything!! It's incredible how hard you work and I think this charity is absolutely amazing and it's clear how much everyone pours their hearts in to it, and the kids love it so much."

"It's difficult to describe what makes Free to Be such a special charity to volunteer with. I've never done volunteer work where the impact you have is quite as immediate. You're working with many children who have never been on holiday, have never seen the sea or never believed they would be brave enough to take part in certain activities. To see the happiness on their faces as they do something for the first time is really amazing. And then you see their confidence grow over the week, and even hear through parents or teachers that this positive development has continued beyond summer - it's a difficult feeling to beat."

Activities this summer included: meeting and looking after farm animals, paddling at the beach, pony trekking through the woods, survival skills sessions, swimming, treetop agility courses, kayaking, archery, raft building in teams, hilltop hide & seek, making pancakes, wild camping, campfire cooking, lakeside barbecues, night walks, navigating a maize maze, rock climbing, den building in the forest, pond dipping and even a firework display!



Under the Stars: Our first camping project with the Kids Farm Trust



In August, in addition to our main projects, we ran our first ever project entirely under canvas, hosted by the Kids Farm Trust at their idyllic base in Sussex. Our children camped in small groups in safari tents, fished and played in a rowing boat on the lake and explored the woods. We collected endless firewood, played lots of hide and seek, made dream catchers to hang in the tents, found shells on a trip to the beach and baked chocolate brownies inside hollowed out oranges in the embers of the fire.

The team from Kids Farm Trust, led by the amazing Janet, cooked delicious meals for us and generally made us feel very welcome and pampered! Percy and Elmo the dogs were a particular hit, enjoying lots of walks and belly rubs from the children.

As on our other residentials, the high ratio of adults to children meant we were able to spend intensive time with individual young people. For some, 'roughing it' and getting used to 'creepy crawlies' was the biggest challenge, while others worked on being part of a team and overcoming disagreements in constructive ways. The flexible nature of the project allowed us to tailor children's experiences to support their specific needs. We created bonding activities to support the building of friendships and chances for

specific children to build confidence via problem solving or taking the lead. We also offered all of the children the chance to belong, relax and simply enjoy quality time chatting round the campfire, playing in the fields and being part of the group.

“We had the best burgers ever and fun every second of the day!”

- Keon, Age 10



Project Impact

Over the last year, we've been developing a range of outcome measures for our residential work, to help us to understand the difference our projects make to children's emotional wellbeing. Written feedback from parents and referrers also helps to build a picture of the of positive impacts we've had on children and their families this summer:

"I just wanted to let you know that when Stephen came into school this morning he ran up to me immediately to tell me how amazing his holiday with Free To Be was. He told me about all the activities that he loved and that he please would really like to go again next year! Thanks so much for organising it! Your work has had a massive impact." - **Secondary School Deputy Head**

"I referred a young woman, Tina, on the residential as she really enjoys outdoor activities and sports. She really wanted to go, but was reluctant and anxious, as she finds it difficult to leave the house. The volunteers at Free to Be worked with her to encourage her to attend and she really enjoyed the trip. The chance to be somewhere different and the opportunity to get involved in lots of activities meant she was more relaxed than I'd seen her for a long time on her return. She really enjoyed being part of a group and had found she had new skills, such as being able to support other young people when they were finding things difficult. The time away definitely boosted her confidence." - **Social Worker**

Our housing officer put us forward to the project as we have recently adopted my niece and nephew and the shift in the family is difficult for both my sons. On top of this we lost our grandmother in April which hit us all very hard. The boys came home and told me about all the different things they done - they felt it had given them space that they needed to be themselves, I honestly have never seen them so excited to tell me everything. Even now after nearly 3 months they keep asking to go back and I honestly hope they get the chance to. Free to Be is amazing and has benefited my two boys so, so much they are so much more independent now. - **Parent**

Based on evaluation information from children, volunteers and referrers

The Impact of our Projects

99% of children who attended reported positive indicators of improved self-esteem, social confidence and resilience, including feeling believed in, trusted, adventurous and special.



86% of children reported trying something they'd previously not thought possible whilst with us.



Project workers reported that 91% of children showed improvement in terms of their self-esteem and social confidence over the project, with **77%** of children showing very significant improvement.



96% developed or learnt new social skills on our projects, including making and keeping friends, relating better with trusted adults and managing frustration and challenge more constructively.



100% of referrers providing feedback reported positive change in the child's emotional wellbeing and/or behaviour after our project, including being more positive, having better interactions with others, managing when things go wrong and having a stronger sense of self.



Supporters

We simply couldn't have made our projects happen without the generosity of a large number of donors and supporters. There are too many individuals to list here, but for all those who have helped us with generous donations of money and goods, provided expert advice and given time to help with admin and set up tasks, we would like to say a great big thank you. We've been lucky to benefit this year from sponsorship money, raised by a number people and groups running half marathons and other races on our behalf and would like to say a particular thank you to them for their tenacity and heroic efforts!

A number of businesses, corporate supporters and community organisations helped to make a huge difference to our work through gifts in kind and other support. Their help allowed us to focus our core funding directly on activities for the children. In particular, we'd like to acknowledge the support of:



Firstly, we'd like to say a huge thank you to the team at mtn-i, who continue to support us in so many ways - from generous funding towards our projects, to practical help with our administration and staff volunteering on our projects.



Booker Wholesale once again generously donated all the non-perishable food and homewares that we needed for our projects, dramatically reducing our catering costs and ensuring healthy and tasty meals for all our children.



ABC Self Store continue to support us by providing clean, dry and secure storage for our equipment outside of projects. Their support ensures our overhead costs are kept low and our equipment is safe and kept in the best possible condition.



Stalbridge Linen supported us by laundering our linen and sleeping bags between projects. We're grateful for their support in helping to make the children's sleeping arrangements as comfortable as possible.



101 Consultants have provided generous funding towards our residential projects for the second year running. We're so grateful for their ongoing support.



Plus Crates very kindly supported us with our storage needs, donating a large number of sturdy boxes to keep and transport our equipment in.



The fantastic team at Cody Dock welcomed our volunteers to their amazing space on the banks of the River Lea and generously hosted our training days.



Last but not least, a very big thank you to Janet, Anthony and the rest of the team at the Kids Farm Trust, for hosting our Under the Stars camping project this summer.

We are also incredibly grateful to the following grant giving bodies and charitable trusts, who generously supported our work this summer:



The Genesis Wellbeing Foundation





www.freetobekids.org.uk

