

The Power of Play

Lessons learned from the first five regions

SUMMARY REPORT
JUNE 2022

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Introduction

Ko te ahurei o te tamaiti arahia ō tātou māhi Let the uniqueness of the child guide our work

The Power of Play is a new approach to generating insights into play in communities around Aotearoa, using a co-design approach and driven by local play leads with Sport NZ support.

Between 2020 and 2022, Sport NZ ran the Power of Play in five regions around Aotearoa New Zealand. In this first phase Sport NZ was seeking to prototype and refine the approach, as well as to generate local understanding, momentum and relationships around play.

The five regions which participated in this first phase were:

- Ōtatahi Christchurch
- Invercargill
- Whanganui
- Gisborne Tairāwhiti
- Bay of Plenty.

This report brings together insights into the experience of participating, the hopes of those who took part, and what was achieved as a result, from those on the ground in these communities. It is intended as a tool to support the team at Sport NZ in the further development of the programme.

The insights and recommendations contained within this report are drawn from detailed feedback collected in a series of Zoom calls which contributed to the development of the five regions animation. A summarised version of these detailed reflections can be found towards the end of the report.



We thank those who shared their perspectives, experiences and thoughts with us, as well as took the bold move to be part of something new and different:



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Insights

In our conversations with Regional Play Leads and colleagues from around the motu we explored:

- What they were seeking to achieve or learn, and who they wanted to connect with.
- Their experiences of participating: the good and the bad, and the advice they'd give to others considering participating.
- Their reflections on the insights gained through the process.
- What they have since done, or are intending to do with the report generated.
- The impact of participating in the Power of Play on them, their partnerships and their understanding of play within the region.

Some of the key insights that emerged from these conversations were:

01: It takes a team

While the Power of Play was a very positive experience for those involved, it was noted that it is a significant undertaking which required significant time investment. Several Play Leads commented that it was a challenge to undertake on part time hours and noted the importance of and wished that they had leaned more on those around them to contact their networks, organise events and generally do the work to bring people together.

02: A process of connection

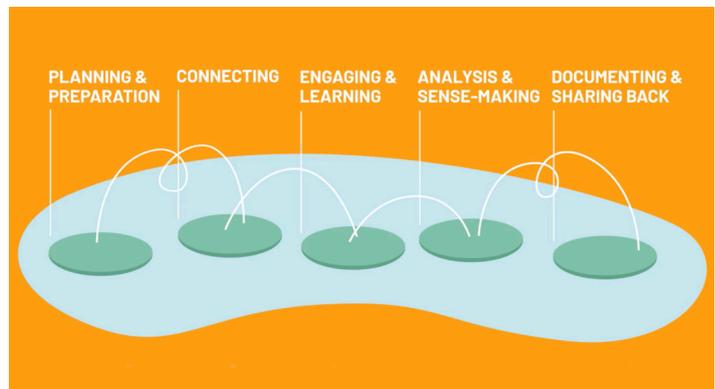
Participants consistently spoke of the value of the co-design approach in:

- building relationships (new and existing)
- 'switching on' people who may not have previously felt particularly connected to the play kaupapa, or felt empowered to contribute actively to play
- providing leads with a deeper connection to place and to networks, including less formal community networks that could powerfully contribute to play.

Having participants reflect on their childhood experiences of play was seen as particularly powerful in creating connection and ownership of play.

03: Community-driven confidence

Participating regions felt their final reports were valuable, useful, and represented their regions well. Beyond the value of the insights themselves, they noted increased confidence speaking about the role of play and advocating for change as they knew these ideas and changes had been validated with and represented the views of their communities.



04: Power beyond play

The impact of the Power of Play on those involved extended beyond that initially expected. Many were seeking to build a greater understanding of play within their organisations and/or communities, but had since found that they were weaving elements of the approach through their broader mahi. Examples were a greater understanding of and appreciation for culturally competent practice, and the role of storytelling, proactively seeking mana whenua voices in wider mahi.

Recommendations

The first five regions were overwhelmingly positive in speaking about the Power of Play, while also providing invaluable feedback into what might make the project more effective, and/or support other regions to participate.

We acknowledge that the Power of Play team at Sport NZ has sought to incorporate learning from each region's experience into the planning and execution of the project in the next, so some of these recommendations may already have been actioned.

Some of the overall recommends that evolved out of The Power of Play co-design process:

Encourage strategic and systemic thought

The first five regions spoke about the many opportunities the Power of Play provided to amplify wider strategic priorities across their mahi and serve as a 'guiding light.' While some planned purposefully for how these might connect, others recognised these opportunities with hindsight and wished they had planned more strategically for what they could get out of the process from the outset.

Share practical support and hacks

The logistics of running the Power of Play are significant and were identified as a challenge in several regions. Some named the ability to learn from those who went before, leveraging off their comms plans, recruitment approaches, etc as very helpful. We recommend you explore how the regions who have already participated could provide practical support and guidance to those who follow.



Privilege local knowledge in sense-making

It was noted that some regions were not involved in the sense-making process. This meant that when insights were initially formulated, important contextual knowledge was missed and the process of gathering data through to finalising the report was not well streamlined. The process also felt less locally owned and driven than intended.

We recommend that regional play partners involved in engagement activities are also involved in sense-making and that their interpretations of data is privileged at this stage, before being validated with community contributors.

Plan for phase two

The first experience of the Power of Play led to significant learning for the first five regions, several of whom noted the value that would be gained by treating this as a baseline and repeating the process at a later date. In some cases, regional teams noted that missing voices had been identified through the process that they would prioritise including in a later round, others simply spoke of how valuable it would be to explore progress over the next few years through repeating this process. Additionally the disruption created by COVID meant that several regions would welcome the opportunity to repeat the Power of Play. We recommend that you explore the possibility of a second phase of the Power of Play in participating regions after a period of 2-5 years or at an opportune time in the planning cycle.

Detailed feedback from the first five regions

(consolidated)



What did you want to learn?

- What the state of play looks like across the region, town vs rural, coastal, etc.
- Finding out stuff that was specific to our region, local, rather than from other places (for example, Scotland, Ireland, Aotearoa-wide).
- Know who is in the community/region to connect with.
- What play strategies existed, what people were already doing.
- Gaining an understanding of how Ihi Aotearoa was thinking/working and the play kaupapa – how it might align with how we were thinking about it and how we could leverage each other's work.
- Insights and learnings into how people played in the past, hopes and aspirations for play in the future and how we might be able to contribute meaningfully towards that.
- What people understood about play, what was missing specifically in our community, and maybe some things we could target. We've done a really good job of that and moving forward, we know what our community wants.
- We wanted to connect people to play – use it as a mechanism to pull people into the journey and make them feel part of the journey.
- Wanted a shiny report and a picture of play in the region. A resource we could use to develop and guide our work in the area.

Who did you want to connect with?

- New contacts made at the Huddles.
- Councils.
- Local iwi.
- Had some good relationships but didn't understand quite how they impact on play so more about strengthening existing relationships.
- Department of Conservation, education (Ministry of Education, teachers, Principals - primary and early childhood), community organisations.
- More opportunities for us to engage with more people now – there's more to do – need to expand cultural and inclusion-focused networks.
- Other systems that impact the play system – the intersection and connection between systems (Healthy Families approach).
- The internal organisation firstly.
- The community – mums, whānau – bring their voices to our stakeholders.
- Everyone's got something to contribute to play.
- Arts community – didn't have a lot of existing relationships but felt like there were so many opportunities to bring the creative and active communities together – play felt like the umbrella and intersection between 'doers' in those spaces.

What worked?

- Reaching out to stakeholders individually – tailoring to their specific pōtae.
- Huddles in different regions and being comfortable with different types of groups and sizes of groups – small and intimate can be great if it's the right people for in-depth kōrero.
- Going along to events – meeting people where they were.
- Being less formal in smaller groups – being confident to do what worked in different settings with different groups.
- Once you turn the play button on with someone, you've got them! Presenting play memories was powerful for bringing people on board.
- Looked at what other regions had done (for example, invite list) to inform and understand.
- Survey with link in email signatures returned good number of respondents.
- Partnered with Healthy Families to link into things they were doing.
- Love the report – it's very reflective of the region.
- Inter-council competitiveness between catchments involved was helpful.
- Insights and evaluation lead was actively involved in sense-making and deciding what was included in the report – helped ensure it was very reflective of us and presented in a way we're happy with.
- Great relationship-builder.
- Very well facilitated by Innovation Unit and Ihi Aotearoa.
- Resource (report) itself has been very useful to understand the regional picture and bring an external view to play.
- Validated that play is important and can contribute to thriving people and places.
- Validated the systems approach to play sufficiency.
- Having externals – Innovation Unit and Sport NZ – brings some extra weight to it. It's not just something we've thought up, it's a nationwide push.

What didn't work or was tricky?

- Doing a big email drop.
- COVID – got in the way of running events and delayed actions arising from it, couldn't engage with iwi and other stakeholders as they had other priorities.
- It took up a lot of time to find out who all the people were, how to hold of them, get them along. Having an event team would've helped, a CRM system or similar – logistical support.
- Didn't know a lot of people – new to the region so relied on staff to tell me who should come but then I was following up and didn't have the relationships
- Fear of missing people out.
- We were the first and weren't quite sure what we were doing so what we ended up doing was different from what people signed up to – it chopped and changed even up to the last minute.
- Iwi voice was missing – if we did it again now we would've done that differently and prioritised it. That's a key learning and we work differently now as a result of our learning here.
- Challenging to get kids to think outside of the context of the engagement – we were at a gymnastics club so they would only talk about gymnastics.
- We stepped on some toes through the process – criticised someone's work because it wasn't good enough – but the butting of heads led to a good outcome.

What advice would you give to other regions?

- Need a really clear paragraph of what the thing is so can be clear with stakeholders about what we're inviting people to, so they can be confident it's a good use of their time.
- Some more clarity around roles upfront would've been helpful, and what everyone wanted to get out of it – be a bit more explicit.
- Bring your whole team together around you – Healthy Active Learning team can bring in schools, comms person is key, event planner, insights team – you'll need them all on the day but also to get bums on seats.
- Need to get those people who have the connections to help you get people along. Make phone calls, make it personal.
- Consider the breadth of who might want to be involved – new people and existing relationships.
- Make sure the relationship with Sport NZ is reciprocal – think about all the ways this could be helpful for you and your work.
- Do it! It's a great way to understand the wider play system and break out of silos.
- Be very intentional about how Power of Play can support you to achieve wider objectives – think systemically.
- Utilise the learnings of those who've done it before you – different ways to facilitate, engage etc.
- Use it for your own, local purposes as well – weave those together (for example, for us, to form our play plan and engage with stakeholders across play).
- Think about it as an education and advocacy tool.
- Have a good sense of what you want to get out of it.

What was surprising?

- Consistency of themes emerging.
- For participants, learning about their childhood versus their kids' experiences.
- Fear around letting children play – doesn't feel that long ago that we were young but something's changed.
- Had assumed technology was getting in the way of young people playing how they used to. I underestimated the role of parents and their fears about children's safety stopping them playing outside.
- Parents worrying about being judged by parents e.g. in playgrounds.
- Busyness meaning that kids lack the space, time and permission to play – coming back to that.
- Kids don't walk to school even if it's just around the corner. They'll get dropped off with their scooters to go on the pump track.
- Parents on their phones – disconnected from their kids when they're at sports practice etc, they're not watching.
- Very little conversation about new equipment and facilities. It was about how we make use of all the cool stuff we have.
- Thought we'd be building a play champions group with MOUs and formal agreements but turned out that's not what we needed at all – really about these connections and relationships and getting a few things going – didn't need to be formal and codified.
- Permission was huge – people wanted to learn about where they could play and what they could do to drive more play themselves.
- Thought we were going to 'blue sky' our play utopia and it would come back on us to make it happen but that wasn't the case – the community wanted to know how they could do it.

What next and what actions has this informed or driven?

- Keep a focus on diversity and diverse needs when activating play plan – different catchments.
- The idea of ‘story’ came through strongly and resonates through all my kaupapa now – the right story connects us to place and connects everyone together and makes the play kaupapa so much stronger.
- Validated a lot of things – we know people want them and can talk compellingly to that now, for example, Māra Hūpara.
- Not sure at the moment – lots of moving parts so figuring out how this fits with all of those pieces.
- Start from scratch – internal audit to find out how we can talk about play and teach play values. We’re keeping it simple and fun.
- Working with older generation – getting parents to play with their kids again not just working with the kids.
- It’s directed a lot of how we do our work – focusing on time and permission over space in our context – focusing the problem we’re trying to solve.
- Freeing up spaces for community to play.
- Used second session where we brought people back together start to build a play plan for the region – community voice feeding straight into that.
- School teacher came along and we’ve been working with him on opening up the school grounds.
- Play trail – confirmed that permission piece was really important so validated this idea – maps and signage to encourage play in existing spaces.
- Given us a firmer footing to stand on to ask for changes and ask for people to get onboard.

What was surprising?

- Diversity across the region is important – understand needs better in different settings.
- It’s okay for kids to be inside and use tech, so long as they’re still using their imagination and creating and being kids, and we’re incorporating outside time too.

Overall Impact

- Key impact was the whakawhanaungatanga – relationships are everything. We're connecting and becoming more of a network and have been working together, grounded by all the pūrākau and insights we heard, which validated so many things.
- Moments of realisation when reflecting on their childhoods and the difference between what was allowed and valued then and what they're allowing their kids to do.
- Learned a lot, for example about how things are driven by individuals and if they're busy, pick up fulltime work etc. things get dropped. Digging into how this all works.
- Started to build understanding of what play looks like and why it's people's business. If we were to do it again we'd probably get a lot more people. It would be interesting to treat this as a baseline and repeat it.
- Can already see things happening and Power of Play was a big part of that. There's Healthy Families on the ground and Power of Play is supporting everything that's happening there.
- Led to a change in how we think about the leadership group and strategic relationship.
- Served as a 'guiding light' for a lot of our other mahi and as a conversations starter for a lot of work. Helps us decide who we partner with and bring us together.
- Used opportunities as a way of taking things forward in our own play journey.
- We use the format of how the huddles were run for how we engage with community on all sorts of things.
- Helped shape the way that we work – build play sufficiency. Keep us in check about how we do our work and guide us.
- The work we traditionally do is in silos. It's the first piece of work we've lead that really opens up the wider system. Helped change the perception that anyone can influence play – it's not just the council players.
- Helped us appreciate the breadth of stakeholders we could work with to influence play and the impact we could have.
- Changed how we approach our leadership space within Healthy Families – submitted a proposal to Ministry of Health to try something different which was agreed. Power of Play was the catalyst – opened my eyes to how broadly we can influence.

- Developing a community-led guide at council, came directly out of this, communities need a better avenue to say 'we want to do this, how can we get it done.' Support to do it themselves.
- Built relationships, led to highly collaborative work which people were happy to jump onboard.
- The report is being used by our partners and cited, for example in funding applications, plans etc.
- Laid the groundwork for lots of partnerships – we don't need to explain why we're doing it and why they should care – they're already excited to be involved.

Final thoughts and questions

- Because we weren't able to get iwi involved, not sure whether we've captured Māori voices sufficiently and reflect them – might affect how much buy in there is and how we take things forward. Need to involve them in the next stage and validate findings. Have much more Māori voices and roles within the system now so hopefully that will enable it.
- Great start – there's more to be done. We didn't deliberately look at doing Power of Play part two or three but we're actually using it as a guide. It's a journey of evolution.
- Beginning of some crucial and key relationships.
- Most useful thing was going back to the community and presenting back the findings so they could understand and get a broad picture of play and what's missing, what's helpful, what they can change.
- Stakeholders are listening to the community, listening to the kids – filling gaps in their knowledge from the beginning and giving the community space to lead. Our council down here has definitely acknowledged that and they're moving forward listening to the community a lot more.
- It's not as complicated as we thought it would be – we just need to do some simple stuff around time and permission.



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