

Lessons from

# Circus Aurora

MAY 2019



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# Headlines

- Circus Aurora was a three-year social circus project delivered by Streetwise Community Circus in Belfast between 2015 and 2018.
- The project worked with more than 240 disabled people and 22 non-disabled people over three years teaching weekly circus skills in communities centres in and around Belfast. Each year culminated in a final performance for friends and family, where participants could showcase their newly acquired skills.
- The impact of the project was explored in an end of project evaluation by Dr Nick McCaffrey, a trustee of Streetwise.

This report summarises his analysis, drawing on the data collected by the Streetwise team. You can find out more at <http://www.sccni.co.uk/>.

## How did Streetwise measure the impact of Circus Aurora?

The aims of Circus Aurora were to increase the wellbeing of its participants, and to improve the perception of disability amongst audiences. These are both challenging areas to measure, and Streetwise experimented with a range of evaluation approaches over the course of the project.

For a more in-depth look at the evaluation challenges please go to page 7 The data in this report is drawn from:

- Yes/no/maybe questions to participants asked as part of warm-up games
- Log book 'diaries' completed by a random sample of participants
- Audience surveys and parental feedback



# Improving wellbeing

More than three quarters of participants come into Circus sessions expecting to enjoy it.

By the end of a term of weekly sessions, when participants are asked the questions again, these numbers have increased further with 85% saying that they like circus.

Streetwise have strong evidence that their project is appealing to their target group – and that those who start off unsure are won over through the session.

Many of the circus skills are difficult to master, and one of the things that was important to Streetwise was capturing whether participants felt pride in their achievements – did they like learning new

skills, and did they enjoy showing these skills off to others?

Streetwise found that a high proportion of participants did enjoy these things: 87% said they liked learning new skills in Circus at the end of term, while 81% said they like showing off what they had learnt.

However, some participants also pointed out that learning new skills was sometimes difficult and frustrating, and in the run-up to the showcase event some participants were nervous about “showing off” what they had learnt.

These themes are reflected in the log books, where a random sample of participants shared their feelings about the project. The





majority of the comments mention specific tricks that they have been learning, or would like to learn, whilst one participant points out “If it’s too easy, then everyone could do it.”

Parents and carers point out the importance of increased confidence and sense of achievement: “My son has really come out of his shell.”

And: “[I’ve noticed] increased confidence alongside a positive mental attitude towards tasks that [he] thought he would never achieve.”

The logbook comments demonstrate the progress participants make with learning new skills: one participant notes initially that her aim is “to get across the hall on stilts”, and in a later session that she has “improved on the stilt walking. I went around the hall twice.”

One of the things that Streetwise grappled with throughout the evaluation was that participants appeared to have high levels of wellbeing before starting the project, which makes it difficult to demonstrate change.

A major distorting factor effecting the baseline was that many participants were in good mood because they were looking forward to the circus session, and so

were perhaps likely to answer wellbeing questions positively.

Standard subjective wellbeing measures such as ONS4 were inappropriate for the cohort, but Streetwise used a Q&A game to explore some of the ways Circus Aurora was impacting their wellbeing.

Between the beginning and end of the project, they saw a 12% increase in participants agreeing that “Doing circus makes me feel happy”, a 9% increase in participants agreeing that they made new friends in circus, and a 10% increase in participants agreeing that it helped them to move around more.

One participant noted the benefits of physical exercise in their log book, explaining that their “speed and stamina was getting better.” The same person also said that they had “tricks to show off at my friend’s birthday party”.

Other participants simply describe the fun that they have had – that they are “in a good mood”, that “circus makes me ecstatic” and that the class “was awesome”. Certainly, family members seem in no doubt that their loved ones have benefited from taking part, with one grandparent commenting: “It has changed their lives for the better.”

# Challenging perceptions of disability



The second key objective for Streetwise was that Circus Aurora would improve perceptions of disability.

Streetwise acknowledged that non-participants who came into contact with the project would be an “informed audience”, either family members or carers who were aware of the issues experienced by disabled people.

However, Streetwise explains that their aim was to “reinforce positive representations of our participants even within communities such as this.”

Streetwise asked audiences at the final showcase whether the show had a direct impact on their own perceptions of disability.

While 34% of the audience said that their perceptions were already positive, and a further 5% answered “no, not really”, 59% of the audience agreed that they had “a more positive perspective on the ability of the performers” after watching the show.

Some of this is reflected in the comments that audiences had about the showcase: the skills and talent on display, the inclusive practice that allowed all abilities to take part, and the general entertainment value of the performance.

Working towards a showcase is an important part of the project design, and something which shows how both perceptions and self-perceptions of what participants could achieve were improved. One parent explained:

“[My son] loved telling me that he had learnt to spin plates. I didn’t believe him at first as I’d had a go and found it really difficult! The look of pride when he spun the plate in the performance was something to behold.”

# Evaluation

Streetwise Community Circus have dedicated a significant amount of effort to evaluating this grant, and the process has evolved considerably over the three years. Their primary challenges were:

- The paucity of appropriate wellbeing measures for participants with learning disabilities.
- The importance of creating an evaluation method that was not burdensome for participants, carers or Streetwise artists – and one that didn't get in the way of them having fun!

One of the main techniques Streetwise used to gather data was through games. Participants moved to different parts of the room depending on whether they agreed or disagreed with certain statements.

This became part of the warm up games for some of the sessions, enabling Streetwise

to quickly gather data from everyone without affecting the pace of the sessions. Streetwise were mindful that this approach may have encouraged some people to cluster around the most popular answers.

A small sample of participants – selected randomly – also completed participation diaries, tracking their mood and responses to the session with support from Streetwise staff.

These diaries have helped build a richer picture of participants' engagement in the project.

If you would like to find out more about Streetwise's evaluation methodology, please get in touch via [info@spiritof2012.org.uk](mailto:info@spiritof2012.org.uk). We would be extremely interested to hear from other organisations who have done similar work – and learn about your techniques for proportionate, interesting evaluations.

