



# PLAY SKILL

Skills for play, skills for life



**Impact Report**  
**2024**



Playskill is a local charity supporting pre-school children with physical disabilities & delays in Hertfordshire, and their families.

The unique one-stop-shop service offers a free term-time specialist playgroup with expert physical therapies; vital support and training for parents; an all-important network of fellow parents; and respite events for the whole family all year round.

Playskill relies entirely on grants and donations in order to keep its valuable and much needed services running.



A. c/o Adeyfield Free Church Centre, Maylands Avenue,  
Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire HP2 4GZ

Registered charity number (CIO) 1198233  
(formerly no: 1122745, established 2006)

## Welcome

I am delighted to introduce our 2024 Impact Report, demonstrating once again the vital impact our work continues to make to the lives of families raising a child with a physical disability/delay. This year we supported more than 80 unique families through our specialist early intervention programmes, hosted a record number of families at social events and saw an increase in the number of graduate families continuing to turn to us after their child has moved on from our groups.

In an effort to truly understand the changing landscape for local families, we conducted a consultation to survey their views on our current service provision. What we learnt will help shape how and where we support them in future. It will give us the opportunity to rationalise our plans for growth and development next year, continuing our focus to be a truly needs led organisation.

Good governance remains at the core of our work with the recruitment of four new trustees with a range of skills and lived experience of our work. Stuart Soloway, our long-standing Chair stood down in November after a decade of dedicated service to the charity with fellow trustees Vicky Grieg and Charlotte Kohnhorst stepping in to Co-Chair roles.

We were privileged to have been selected as one of ten local voluntary sector organisations to take part in Hertfordshire Community Foundation's Building Effectiveness Programme, which will support work on our new three-year business plan.

Our fantastic stewardship of existing relationships resulted in our first ever golf day being held at The Grove in October, a resounding success supported with matched funding by Helping Herts. We also want to thank Moor Park Golf Club for selecting us as their Charity Partner for the second consecutive year and to Postcode Places Trust for choosing us as a Millionaire's Row beneficiary. We continue to provide our services free to families despite receiving no statutory funding and want to thank all of our funders for continuing to make this possible.

The current climate is undoubtedly the most challenging the families we support have faced in the 20 years I have been working in the disability sector. Cuts to local services and the cost-of-living crisis disproportionately affect families of disabled children. The need for us to continue our work could never be more pressing.

Helping to build resilient families who are able to weather the storms and challenges ahead is paramount to our mission. I am proud to lead an organisation where every trustee and staff member remains dedicated to this work. I want to thank them, our volunteers and funders for continuing to believe in and champion our work. It would not be possible without you.

I hope the stories and quotes in the report inspire you all as much as they do me every day to continue to provide the best possible service to families now and in to the future.

Niki Michael, CEO





# 2024 in numbers



176

supported in group & through Springboard



4,002

hours of family therapeutic support through our groups



87.8%

of SMART targets were achieved



523

people attended our 16 respite events



126

people attended our 22 training events



55

Graduate members



11

Full time equivalent, comprising 31 dedicated members of staff



36

volunteers, who generously gave an estimated

1,246

hours of support



a skilled Trustee & Leadership team, with more than

54%

having lived experience of disability/caring

# Noah's Story

**“ Noah is two years old and has ACC, a rare birth defect in the brain signals which causes developmental delay.**

Being a first time mum I faced many challenges with Noah, most that many mums never expect to face. Being a young mum too is an extra challenge as my friends and I are all at different stages of life. Some of my friends have children but could never understand the struggles I face with Noah. My health visitor recommended Playskill as she thought they could help both Noah and me. Noah, started at Playskill when he was just over a year old.

Meeting parents at Playskill who are going through similar situations has helped me become more sociable and come out of my shell. Noah faced challenge with his mobility and has come a long way since coming to Playskill. He can now crawl, pull himself up and is trying so hard to walk. He adores going to Playskill and learns new skills every time.

Playskill is a lovely place for your child. They make you feel so welcome and it's such a happy place! It's also an amazing support system for you and your child - Playskill is here to support both of you.”

After attending Playskill for six months, Olivia took part in a fundraising walk for the

charity, joined by her mum and friend.

“My mum and I wanted to take part in this walk as Playskill has become a big part of Noah's life, and ours. We wanted to raise money to say thank you for their time and effort they put into Noah's development. Raising money for Playskill means a lot to us. Playskill are amazing with Noah and have helped him so much, even just in the first term. Noah always has a big smile on his face coming to Playskill and I can tell all the children there are so happy and enjoy it so much. Playskill makes Noah feel supported and loved.”

Olivia's mum adds: “I recently visited Playskill, and it was a joy to see my grandson, who usually struggles with certain activities, following instructions, getting excited at certain parts of the session, knowing the routine of what comes next and joining in with a big smile on his face. The group has been a big benefit to Noah. He has come on so much since joining, and it's also been great for my daughter to meet other parents and share their stories and experiences.

That is why I decided to take part in the Walk to raise money for Playskill, as I think it's an amazing worthwhile charity that our mini heroes need in their little lives.”

**– Olivia, Noah's mum**









# Playskill Groups

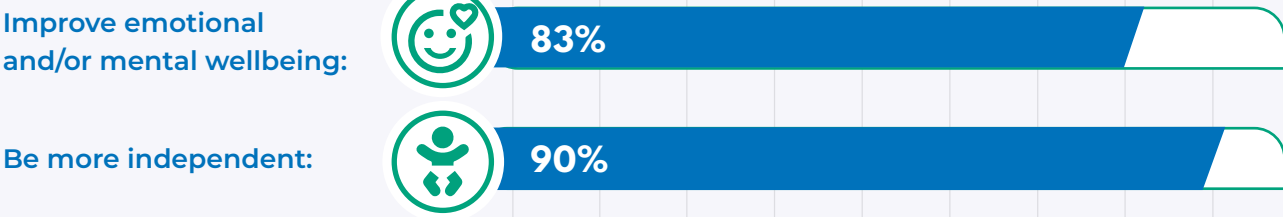
Forming only one part of our **one-stop-shop service** for children and families are our **free term time groups**. These are attended by children with their parents/carers where they receive **expert support from a physiotherapist**, as well as an **occupational therapist** and **speech and language therapist**. Each group session uses play as a tool for development (including messy play, sensory activities and soft play) helping children to **gain key skills, confidence and independence**. Parents, grandparents and carers are trained to **replicate the therapies at home to maximise impact**.

“Knowing our daughter has the support she needs from Playskill has given us hope and the strength to continue.”

### Across our groups:



### Playskill helps my child to:

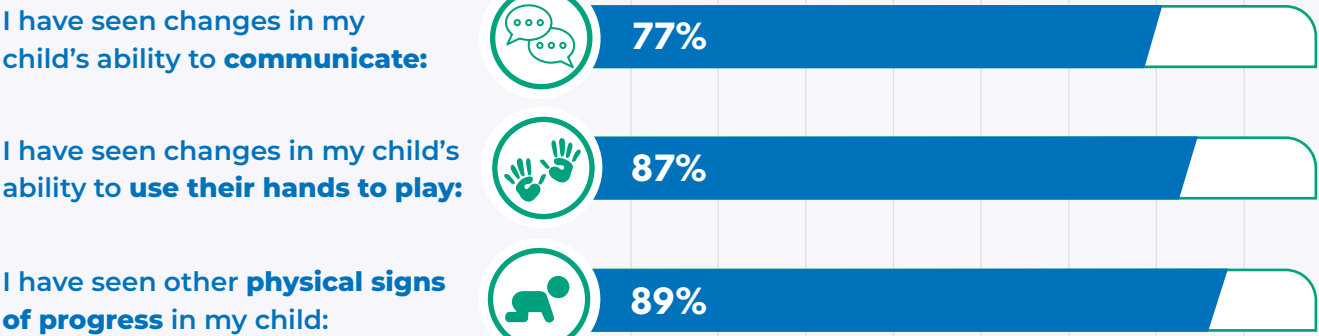


In addition to helping the children directly, Playskill also supports parents and carers through hands on modelling and advice from therapists and specialist workers in the weekly sessions.



### Our end-of-term parent questionnaires showed:

Parents who 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the following statements:  
Over this term at Playskill:



“I appreciate the connection with other parents and the warmth of the team. I love seeing others, who clearly care about my son, interacting with him and helping him develop.”

“Limitations are never discussed at Playskill, it's all about next steps and targets, which is so uplifting. I can't put in to words how much this has meant to me.”



# Supporting parents and families

Parents tell us of the struggle they face trying to find information and access services and support they need, and are entitled to. This can cause stress and anxiety and leave some families in financial hardship.

Our **Family Support Team** and **parent training** are key to helping parents/carers navigate a range of health, education, care, financial, legal and emotional challenges. **Family Support** offer free personalised advice on a range of often complex and confusing matters. In addition there are **remote and face-to-face training sessions** delivered by experts in their field, aimed at developing parent/carers knowledge, skills, resources and confidence to support their child.

57 

families were helped by our Parent Support Team, many on multiple issues and across multiple terms

The most common themes for support were:

- 1. EHCPs
- 2. Monetary and benefits
- 3. Education
- 4. Other
- 5. Health

30 

training sessions were attended by 126 parents/carers

27 

hours of training were delivered during 22 training events across the year

“ Playskill is the best support team I have ever seen.

Training topics and content are based on the needs of children/ families attending groups. In 2024, courses included **starting school; EHCP applications & assessments; managing behaviour; signing; toileting; reading; physiotherapy; sensory processing; young carers; wills, trust & power of attorney** and more.

“ Playskill is a vital service and my family is in such a strong place thanks to their support.

# Lucinda & Will

“ William started at Playskill shortly after his second birthday. He has been attending for just over a year and we have seen such a huge change in him.

Will spent just over a year in Great Ormond Street Hospital, having treatment for benign tumours that were in his lungs, bowels and peripheral limbs. He was fed intravenously for two years and had been through multiple surgeries and chemotherapy by the time we took him home.

His immune system was very weak and he was vulnerable to catching viruses which would lead to many hospital visits due to having a central line and the risk of Sepsis, which he had had four times in hospital. For the first two years, life was very isolating for us as a family with the fear of infection.

However, with time, Will slowly managed to transition from intravenous nutrition to milk through an NG tube, and it is now one year since he had his central line taken out. It was such a huge milestone. It felt like the world had opened its doors to us. Playskill was the first group setting we took Will to. Being inside with a group of people had, until recently, been a huge source of anxiety. Apart from his older brother, Will had rarely spent time or seen other children.

I remember the first session he spent crying and was totally overwhelmed. In fact, I think was the same. Over the past year, he has found his love for nursery rhymes, hello time and even started joining in with messy play.

The gains sound so small, but to a child with his history and disabilities (oral aversion/tube fed) are huge step forward. I have felt guided in where his needs are and the targets set have been SMART. The team take time to get to know your child and understand their limitations and how best to improve certain skills or communication.

The Playskill sessions give children like Will, the time and encouragement they need to be able to explore their sensory and physical needs. With every child having their own challenges, the team have a lot of considerations to make, so it is a safe space for each individual to thrive.

The sessions are also a time to meet other parents raising a special needs child. Sometimes, it can feel isolating and overwhelming navigating the barriers that children with special needs face daily and in their future. Having a tea and chatting through similar road blocks helps you feel less alone. Playskill has many services outside of the sessions to help guide parents with these barriers, as well as meet ups to get people together.

Will still attends some appointments at GOSH but they are slowly transferring in to the community. The NHS waiting times are huge so we feel very grateful that Playskill allows us to access some of the services we are waiting for.

– Lucinda, Will's mum





# Bringing families together

From talking to our families, we know that many feel a sense of isolation, anxiety and stress living with the challenges the SEND world can bring. We know that siblings sometimes take a back seat and have limited time with their parents. Our programme of social and respite events are seen, by many, as a lifeline, helping them and their children to meet new friends, build support networks and overcome financial barriers that may be in place.

## Support networks

Connecting with other parents in a similar situation can be a great source of **practical and emotional support**, helping families cope and **reducing feelings of isolation**.



52%

of parents/carers said they do not attend any other SEND playgroups in the area

## Social activities and respite events

Our free events are a lifeline to many, giving siblings one-on-one time with parents, parents or carers the chance to have adult conversation over dinner, or simply the opportunity for the whole family to be out together having fun.



523

family members joined 16 events organised by Playskill

“Playskill will have/has had a lasting positive impact on me/my child/my family”

98.3%

Events included accessible outings for the whole family, in a safe and inclusive environment, including firm favourites from previous years, plus new events introduced, thanks to feedback from our families. Sailing, go-karting, snow centre, farm and theatre trips for the family, plus afternoon tea, art therapy, axe throwing and meals out for the adults.

“ Having a support system and people to talk to that really care has really helped my mental health.

“ Thank you. It was truly a respite, relaxing, so much fun, and lovely connecting with other parents. I enjoyed every minute.

“ It was fantastic to meet fellow Dads going through similar challenges.



It was such a special thing to have some one-on-one time with my son, doing an activity we would never normally do, and meet other lovely families together.

## Long term engagement & support

Once children graduate from Playskill, families can become Graduate Members (for a nominal £20 annual subscription), enabling them to continue to access parent support, training and social/respite events.

55



graduate members continue to be involved in our work

# Oscar's story

“ At six weeks old, Oscar was admitted to hospital with meningitis. When he was discharged after five long days, we were told he had viral meningitis and we were lucky that there would be no long-lasting effects.

I soon noticed that Oscar's development was delayed. I remember worrying because he didn't hold his head up at the expected age, he couldn't sit up unaided or babble, and weaning was extremely difficult because he just wasn't ready. But no one listened to me, it seemed no one understood what I was saying or what we were going through. I raised my concerns many times to various different people. He eventually had an MRI and started physio at nine months old. I was told so many times 'he's young' and 'he'll catch up', or 'babies do things at their own pace'. It's very sad but I felt I couldn't take Oscar to your average mum and baby group because I would continuously have to explain why my baby couldn't do various things and it just made me even more worried for him.

At his one year review my health visitor agreed there were some delays and, as he was already under a paediatrician, all they could do was refer him to Playskill. It sounds cliché to say, but that's when I finally felt listened to.

He had an online assessment with a therapist from Playskill. She immediately listened to all my concerns and Oscar's needs, and told us what Playskill was all about. When we were welcomed to the group everyone was so kind, caring and comforting and people really knew how I was feeling. I felt relaxed and at ease, with no judgement. Just care and compassion and a real desire to help my child succeed.

Oscar started at Playskill aged one and is now three years old. We still have no diagnosis for Oscar, at the moment he has global developmental delay of unknown cause. He is under genetics and neurology, it's a long road to a diagnosis and we're only a little way there.

Oscar's needs aren't always complex enough for him to be entitled to NHS services. He had physio until he could walk and then was discharged, he's never been accepted for OT and they won't refer to speech and language until 2.5 years old, and then it's such a long waiting list. This is why Playskill is so valuable to us because it means he can still get the help he needs, regardless of the complexity of those needs.

In the almost two years since Oscar has been at Playskill, he has developed in leaps and bounds. He can now walk, he has started babbling and being able to use his hands and play with toys. He can make marks with a pen, and he is beginning to show signs of being able to feed himself. Oscar is so happy to come to Playskill. He often gets anxious and nervous in crowded unfamiliar environments, but you can see from how settled and comfortable he is there, just how much he enjoys it. It feels like a safe space for him.

Playskill has changed me as a parent in so many ways. Before Playskill I felt lost and alone, I didn't know where to go for support or help. I didn't know anyone in a situation similar to ours. I felt so anxious and emotional about our situation. But there is always someone at Playskill to listen and comfort and support us. Not only me as a parent but our whole family. We have evening events for parents to give us all a

well-deserved break. But most of all I love the sibling days. I think sometimes siblings can get overlooked but they're also going through this journey too. Playskill makes sure that doesn't happen. My older son has enjoyed various different days just for him which he absolutely loves. He also attended group many times before he started school and would always ask me what day we were going to Playskill because he enjoyed watching Oscar there so much. I believe it has made him such a caring and compassionate person from watching and engaging with children with additional needs.

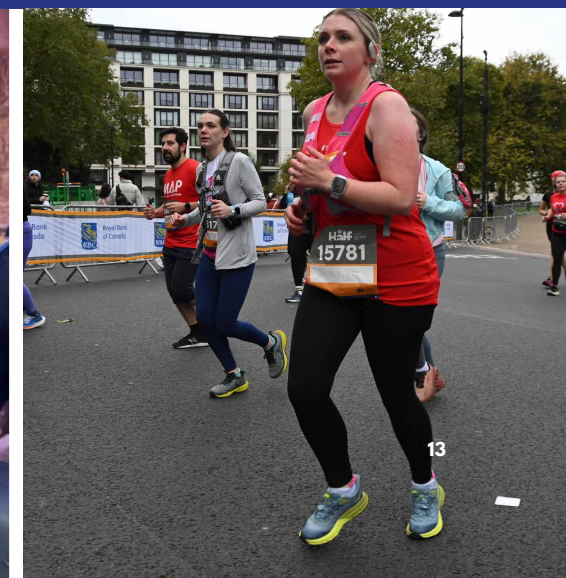
In 2024, I signed up for my first ever organised race, the Royal Parks Half Marathon, choosing to raise funds for Playskill. I really wanted to

find a way to give back for all the wonderful help Playskill have given Oscar and our family. I also wanted to set myself a challenge. Seeing how hard Oscar and all the other children work in group to achieve their goals, motivated me to try and do something to help raise money for the charity.

I would tell others to come to Playskill because it is an amazing charity that helps children with additional needs in so many ways. It's not just for the child, it's for the family unit. You will feel supported, cared for and listened to and they will always help wherever they can.”

– Julie, Oscar's mum

“ Before Playskill, I felt lost and alone. I finally felt listened to. The whole family is supported and cared for.









# Reaching more children and families

## Springboard

Families with disabled children are disproportionately affected by long waiting lists for vital healthcare appointments, referrals and therapies. It is vital that children with physical disabilities receive care during the crucial early intervention window (from birth to five) when the brain is developing faster than at any other time.

Through our remote Springboard support service, we rapidly assess children newly referred to Playskill, provide therapy input, advice and signposting, to help a greater number of children and families at the earliest opportunity.

“ We finally feel that sense of belonging somewhere, when we have felt alone and unsupported for so long.



34

children were supported through Springboard



23

children seen in Springboard fed in to Playskill groups, with others receiving advice & signposting

# Elis' Story

“ We received Elis' diagnosis of a rare genetic disorder that affects the development of the brain and nervous system in November 2020.

After finding out about Playskill online, we got in touch immediately because we knew he'd have challenges that they could support us with. He was behind in meeting many of his milestones, such as walking, babbling and even smiling and his diagnosis confirmed that he would likely always need support to reach his full potential.

Elis is now five years old and started at Playskill when he was one. Playskill was the first service we received that offered us regular sessions of therapies. They offered Elis weekly physio, OT & SLT but also gave us support to continue the therapies at home. Playskill really pushed Elis and gave us a whole variety of exercises to try at home, as well as advice on equipment or other services such as the lycra clinic. Elis is developing new skills which I can credit to the work at Playskill, and most importantly he seems to really enjoy the sessions; he loves the singing, hello button and snack time!

Being part of Playskill makes me feel normal in a world where it can be tough being a parent of a child with complex needs. It's a place where I'm surrounded by other families going through the same things who understand us completely, and by therapists who know Elis inside out and how to support him. It's also given us confidence to support Elis with therapies at home, and provided us with a much needed friend and support network.

I always rave about Playskill to others. It's such a lovely charity and we're so lucky to have this support available to us in Hertfordshire. I'd feel a little lost without it, there's nothing else like it.

Last year I took part in Playskill's fundraising walk with Helping Herts. As well as being a great opportunity to spend time with and get to know people who have a connection to the charity, it's a really great feeling to be able to raise funds to give back to Playskill so they can continue to give support to other families. Playskill have helped our family so much, I almost feel like there's not enough I can do to say thank you, but fundraising is a start.

– Helen, Elis' mum





# Your support

Playskill receives no government funding and we rely wholly on donations to help transform the lives of children with physical disabilities/difficulties and their families. All our services are completely free to families attending our groups.

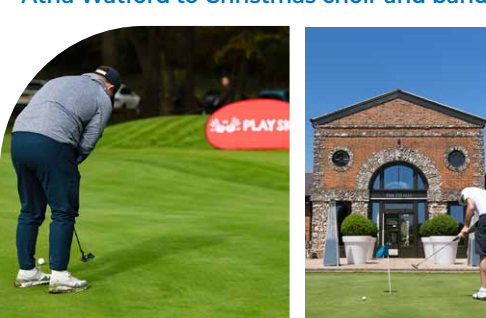
Our army of committed supporters, alongside philanthropic trusts and foundations, raised vital funds and awareness through sponsorship of their epic physical challenges and more sedate golfing, bucket collections, gift wrapping, bake sales and much more.

With your amazing support, Playskill raised:

**£605,279**  
in **2024**



Festive fundraising from gift wrapping at Atria Watford to Christmas choir and bands.



Blood, sweat & tears with 50km treks, marathons, half marathons, cycles, swims and more!

Playskill's first Golf Day at The Grove, Herts, was a big hit, raising £20,000, with profits generously match funded by Helping Herts.



Thousands raised through our obstacle course, Wear it Red, Springfest fun run and festive fundraising.

Global's Make Some Noise boosted their generous grant by raising awareness revealing funds raised on Heart Radio & when Spencer Matthews completed his training marathon at Playskill's group.

# Our partners

Year on year, our partnerships are growing with corporate and community organisations seeing the impact of our work and choosing to support local. 2024 saw another successful year of partnerships has not only raised vital funds but equally vital awareness for both new eligible families, and new partners/funders to support the cause.



Moor Park Golf Club Captains continued their support for a second year, raising a phenomenal £103,000 during the partnership. Retaining the crown of the charity's largest ever single donation from a community group. Plus an additional £20,000+ of residual donations received as a result of the partnership.



Two half marathon walks with Helping Herts – now staples in the Team Playskill calendar. With match funding, the partnership has raised over £46,000 for Playskill, plus funds for 11 other Hertfordshire charities.

The walk is also supported by Imagination Technologies, the location where the walk begins/ends. A wonderful example of one partnership opening the door to another.



A second year of support from The Grove – sponsored rowathon, outdoor cinema, prize donations, the Great Big Walk for Herts and Christmas volunteering,

People's Postcode Lottery filming with parents ahead of the big reveal of their £50,000 Millionaire Street grant.



Playskill's own events are generously supported by local organisations – donations include venue, photography, toys & books, easter eggs, refreshments, prizes and sponsorship.

With thanks to Asda Watford, Chorleywood Bookshop, Dunelm Hemel Hempstead, Elco Accounting, Savills, Imagination Technologies, London Gliding Club, LRG Financial Solutions, Maurizo's, Old Town Golf, Royal Masonic School, Sophie Oldhamstead Photography, Surprize Shop Golf, Tesco Watford & Rickmansworth, Wenta Business Centre, Wenzel's.





## Thank you

We are immensely grateful to the many trusts, foundations, community groups, corporate partners and individuals who have generously supported our work in 2024.

Recognising all who have supported, including larger donations received from:

Barratt Homes PLC; Children in Need; Children's Welfare Research Foundation; Garfield Weston Foundation; Global Make Some Noise; Helping Herts; Hertfordshire Community Foundation; Masonic Charitable Foundation; Mencop West Herts; Postcode Places Trust; Simon Gibson Trust; St James Place Foundation; The February Foundation; The Hadley Trust; The Henry Smith Foundation; The National Lottery Community Fund; West Herts Golf Club.

To donate visit  
[playskill.org/donate](https://playskill.org/donate)



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The National Lottery Community Fund





