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FAMILY ROUTES:

CREATING CONNECTION THROUGH WALKING

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This report presents the process and initial findings of the interdisciplinary project 'Family Routes: Creating Connection through Walking'.

Our goal was to co-create a project to:

- Explore the everyday walking practices of families.
- Identify the place-based challenges families face when it comes to mobility.
- Capture the walking experiences of families and their impact on wellbeing through creative methods.

In response to national agendas around creative health and wellbeing, and the government's renewed emphasis on place-based culture, the project sought to understand how families connect to each other and to places through walking in their local environments. We focused on amplifying the challenges families, particularly those with preschool-aged children encounter while walking, to demonstrate how walking can inspire imagination, provided logistical barriers are addressed.

Crucially, we aimed to listen to every member of the family, from the youngest to the oldest, and together, find creative ways to capture these experiences. Through this approach, we hope to showcase the potential of walking to foster deeper family connections and well being.

To achieve this we set out to co-create a project in partnership with interdisciplinary experts and practitioners who each brought their unique perspectives to the project design and delivery:

Dr Anna Powell
Project co-lead,
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Dr Louise Platt
Project co-lead,
Manchester Metropolitan University

Ellie Thomas
Artist and facilitator,
The Children's Art School,
Huddersfield

Claire Bend
Film-maker,
University of Huddersfield

Dr Alessia Anastassopulos
Sound artist,
University of Huddersfield

Walking with babies and children

Walking helps us make sense of our worlds. However, it has been argued that the childhood world is shrinking. Easy access to local outdoor spaces is essential for fostering a child's connection to their surroundings. The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the disparities in access to green spaces across the UK, with The Ramblers in 2024 reporting that 21 million people live more than 15 minutes away from a green or blue space. While 15 minutes may not seem far, walking with small children often takes significantly longer, creating a real barrier for families trying to spend time outdoors together.

Walking in local areas fosters a sense of belonging while navigating the new identity of parenthood, so is particularly beneficial for new parents, not only for mental and physical health benefits but also for developing a connection to place and community.

Walking with a child slows us down, helping us attune to our local environment – something we, as adults, might otherwise overlook. While it's easy to romanticise these walks, it's important to remember the often challenging logistics of walking with babies or small children, not least the amount of necessary 'stuff' that accompanies walking with young children. Research from Blaze Trails CIC, a UK network of parent walking groups, highlights that new parents often struggle with planning and preparing for walks with their babies, which can be a significant barrier to getting outside.



Co-creating with families

This project collaborated with families to explore the relationships that are formed between bodies and spaces, reflecting on their experiences of walking.

We worked with eight families from the Holmfirth area who were members of the Bosom Buddies Huddersfield peer support group. Each family took us on walks in their local area. These walks were routes that were regularly undertaken by the families. Some had recently discovered these pathways and others had been stomping out this route since before they even had children in tow! Some babies were in prams, some in slings, toddlers toddled in front, behind, to the side. Older children raced ahead, back, forth and through ditches. Using Go-Pro cameras we were able to record video footage from both parent and child perspectives. En-route we talked about their walking practices, their communities and how they experience their neighbourhoods as a family.

One challenge for this project was how to represent and respect the views of very young children in a way which honoured their walking experiences – both real and imagined. Preschool-aged children's voices are often missing from conversations about what happens in their own neighbourhoods. In part this is because of the inappropriateness of using traditional research methods with this age group.

Working with The Children's Art School; experts in facilitating creative activities with families, we collectively created a visual output which translated memories of their walks into the form of a creative 'map' as a means of eliciting meaningful reflections from all participants.



A Parent's Eye View...

"It's tricky trying to time walks around their naps"



"So this is quite a busy road and it can be challenging to get everyone across"

ZZZZZ... WAHHH!...

"Sometimes I think I need to take the carrier rather than the buggy depending on the route I take"



"Don't get me started on dog poo"

"I have to take the pram on the road here to get round the parked cars and bins"



"I sometimes just sit on the ground to feed the little one"



"It's about how long we can actually walk with all the stuff and when I might have to carry him too"



A Child's Eye View...

"I am looking for lambliboos"

"We went for a walk in the wolf woods".



"We're looking for the bear"

"We sometimes go to the den or build a new one"

"Walking in tunnels makes my voice sound funny. It is called an echo"

ROAR!!



The Family Routes Toolkit

Collaborate

Leverage the skills of others - Employ expert artist facilitators to help empower families to embrace their creativity - and don't assume what will emerge.



Connect

Establish trust - making use of existing community networks to understand the everyday experiences of those that live there. Go for a walk with the families - experience what they experience. Follow their lead - even better - follow the toddler! Give them time, no agenda.

Record

Record the experiences - make use of multi-modal methods (Go-Pro, video, photos, participant created images etc). Try not to interfere with the walk...parents have enough to think about and carry!



Co-create

Everyone can get involved - From simple mark-marking (colours and shapes can express a memory or emotion) to detailed drawings. Take a step back to listen to and engage in spontaneous conversations. The process is as much about observing and listening as it is about a final visual outcome.

Disseminate and Reconnect

View the created outcome as a fork in the road - Rich with potential for further exploration; a step along the way and not a destination. Invite participants to reflect on their creation and welcome new interpretations by finding ways of making the work accessible to a wider audience. Make use of place-based assets to display the work in community.



Next steps...

The artwork showcased by families in an exhibition at Holmfirth Library in November 2024 is not the final chapter of this project—it's a pause, a chance to reflect, and a step towards new possibilities. We hope these creations spark meaningful reflection from families about their own walking experiences and what those journeys represent to them.

Our goal is to ignite a conversation within communities about how we can cultivate environments that inspire the imaginations of both adults and children while walking. This project has shown us that preschool-aged children have remarkable insights about their walking experiences, and it's crucial that we find innovative and accessible ways to listen to and engage with their voices.

A key finding of this pilot project was that co-creation and collaboration with families themselves, artists and other specialists is essential to capture a plurality of voices - beyond the voice of the researcher - to ensure outcomes are authentic.



Feedback

In the spirit of co-creation we welcome your feedback. Please get in touch to share your thoughts on the visuals, ideas and maybe your own families walking experiences.

We hope to deliver this project in other locations and with different community groups in the future. Once again, ensuring we make use of local knowledge and expertise.

Get in touch

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familyroutesproject.wordpress.com



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Thank to **Claire Bend** for creating two short films of the project and inspiring us to make use of Go-Pros to offer a child's-eye view of the world. These films can be seen on the project website.

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