



Programme overview, impact & evaluation 2025



Why did we create Curious Beasts?



- Our children are facing a population health crisis in mental health and wellbeing.
- About one in five 8 to 25 year olds had a diagnosable mental health problem in 2023.
- Children in the least well-off 20% of households are four times more likely to experience serious mental health difficulties by age 11 compared to those from the wealthiest 20%.
- Increased investment in specialist CAMHS services has not kept pace with the scale of demand. The pathway to support is fragmented, with a limited number of early intervention services based in schools and communities.
- Clear need for early identification and intervention.
- Need for improved, innovative screening capturing the child's voice: traditional paper questionnaires often fail to capture the authentic voice of younger children.

Source: <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/report-missing-link-social-prescribing-children-young-people.pdf>

Impacts of poor mental health



Social, emotional and mental health difficulties have numerous substantial impacts for children:

- **Increased risk of school exclusion** (DfE, 2020, Graham et al., 2019, DfE 2017, Hayden, 2007, Visser, Daniels., and Macnab 2005)
- **Poor school attendance and attainment** (DfE, 2017 , DfE, 2020)
- **Poor long-term outcomes and life chances;** including unemployment, long-term mental health difficulties, increased chance of entering the youth justice system.



Supporting creatively healthy children



Creative health isn't just enrichment—it's evidence-based support for children's mental, emotional, and social development.



The importance of creative health



Backed by National Guidance

- *UK's All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Arts, Health & Wellbeing:* Creative health is essential for early intervention
- *National Centre for Creative Health:* Recommends arts as part of children's wellbeing pathways
- *NICE (Social & Emotional Wellbeing in Primary Education)* supports expressive, play-based methods

Supports Cognitive & Social Development

- Strengthens problem-solving, resilience, and communication
- Enhances peer relationships and classroom engagement

Builds Lifelong Resilience

- Provides safe spaces for exploration and rehearsal
- Helps children develop coping strategies and confidence

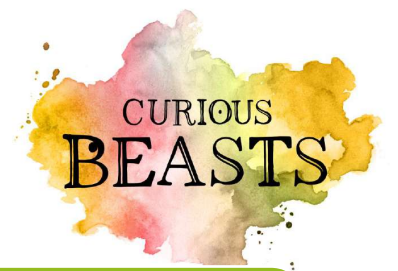
Boosts Mental Wellbeing

- Helps children express emotions safely
- Reduces anxiety and supports regulation
- *WHO (2019):* Strong evidence linking arts participation to improved mental health

Inclusive & Accessible

- Offers non-verbal ways to participate
- Especially effective for children who struggle with traditional learning or emotional expression

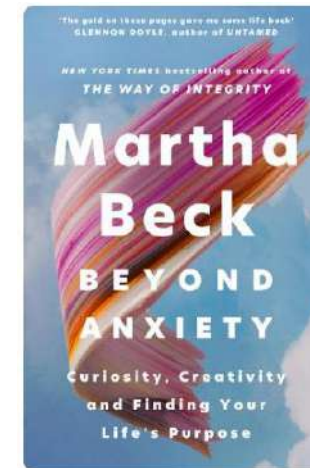
Regulating emotions with creativity



Systematic review of evidence (Barnett and Vasiu, 2024) shows engagement with creative arts consistently activates neural circuits that regulate emotions

Beyond Anxiety (2025)- shifting focus from the "anxiety spiral" to the "creativity spiral" activates the "rest and restore" nervous system functions instead of the "fight or flight" response.

"There is a toggle effect between anxiety and creativity: when one is up and running, the other seems to go silent".



Dr Martha Beck, Harvard Sociologist and life coach

Why use puppetry in intervention?



Creates emotional distance

Puppets act as a safe “buffer,” allowing children to explore difficult feelings and experiences without the pressure of speaking directly about themselves.

Supports emotional regulation

Puppetry offers a playful, hands-on way for children to practise naming feelings, problem-solving, and trying out new coping strategies.

Puppet as a representation of the child

Allows children to project their emotions, worries, and behaviours onto the puppet, enabling them to express thoughts they may struggle to communicate.

Encourages creativity & imagination

The creative process helps children externalise internal experiences, making abstract emotions more concrete and manageable.

Reduces anxiety & builds confidence

Speaking “through” a puppet feels less exposing, helping children open up, take risks, and engage more readily in therapeutic or learning activities.

Strengthens connection & communication

Puppets create a shared focus, helping children engage with adults and peers in a non-threatening, relational way.



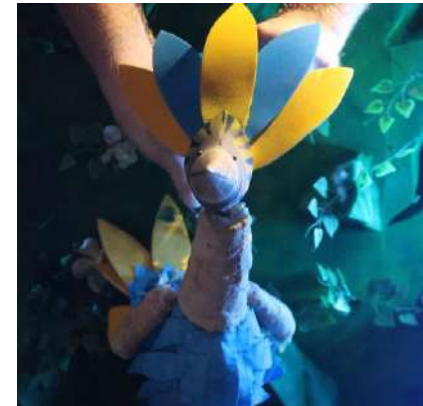
Programme overview



Developing Curious Beasts



- Informed by lived experience and priorities of schools.
- Our research with 10 schools across the North East explored the most pressing mental health needs in children, these were reported as:
 - Self-regulation
 - Anxiety
 - Resilience
 - Peer relations
- In addition, there is extensive evidence for the benefits of creative arts to support children's wellbeing; we wanted to combine creative arts with innovative screening to target mental health priorities for children.
- Plus- Curious Beasts now offers teacher training to deliver nurture sessions, offering affordability and sustainability for schools, year after year



Our Curious Beasts programme



1

Puppet workshop

- Enter the magical world of Curious Beasts! An immersive workshop for the whole class (ages 7-10)
- Facilitated by professional puppeteers- Life & Limb Puppets
- Puppets represent different social-emotional mental health (SEMH) needs
- Designed to capture the child's voice- children reflect, and identify their own strengths and difficulties

2

Assessment of SEMH

- Child self-report during the puppet workshop
- Teachers complete a standardised assessment, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)
- Child and teacher data informs selection of 12 children for Curious Beasts nurture sessions

3

Nurture

- Children receive 6 weekly sessions of therapeutic nurture delivered by a trained nurture practitioner
- Nurture support is tailored to each individual child's needs
- Sessions include puppetry, storytelling, and nature-based wellbeing. Each child creates their own "spirit animal" puppet, a tool for exploring emotions, building self-esteem, and practising healthy coping strategies

4

Teacher training

- Schools can opt for staff training so they can deliver nurture sessions to future cohorts independently
- Trained staff receive lesson plans, coaching, and mentorship in nurture-based approaches
- Builds long-term capacity, supports sustainability for schools and value for money

Family support:

Parent sessions share strategies and resources to support family engagement and reinforce skills at home

School impact report:

Each school receives an Ofsted-ready comprehensive impact report detailing programme outcomes

Enter the magical world of Curious Beasts!



[Click here to watch Curious Beasts in action! Curious Beasts Video Link](#)



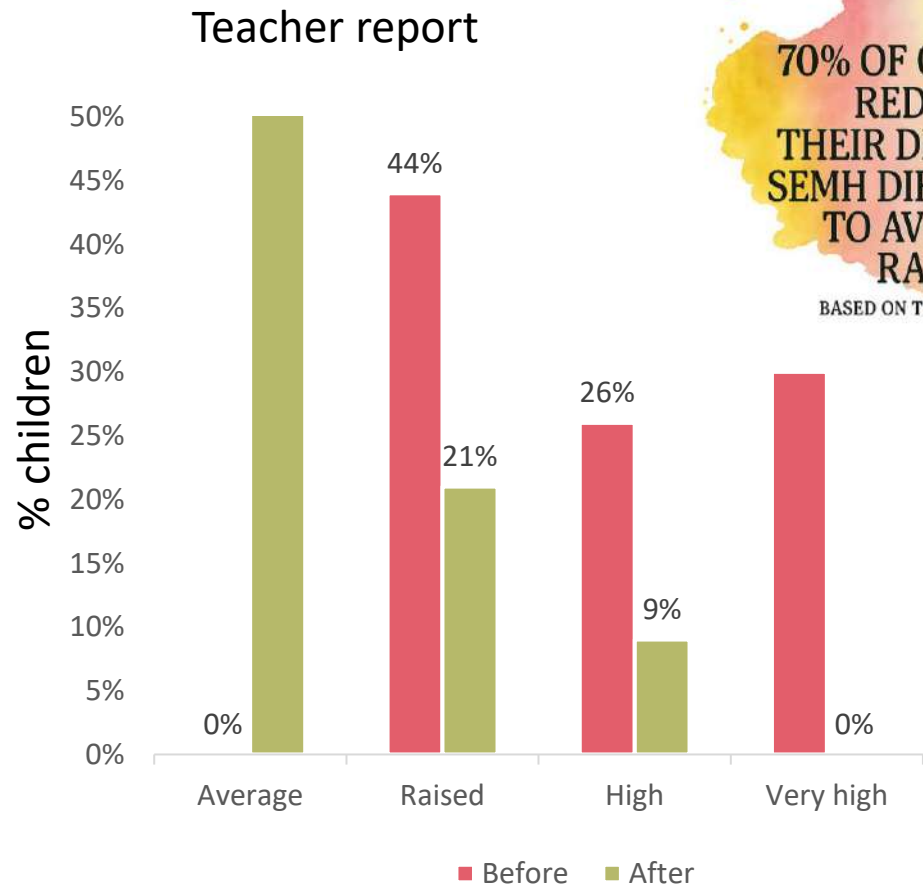


Impact & evaluation

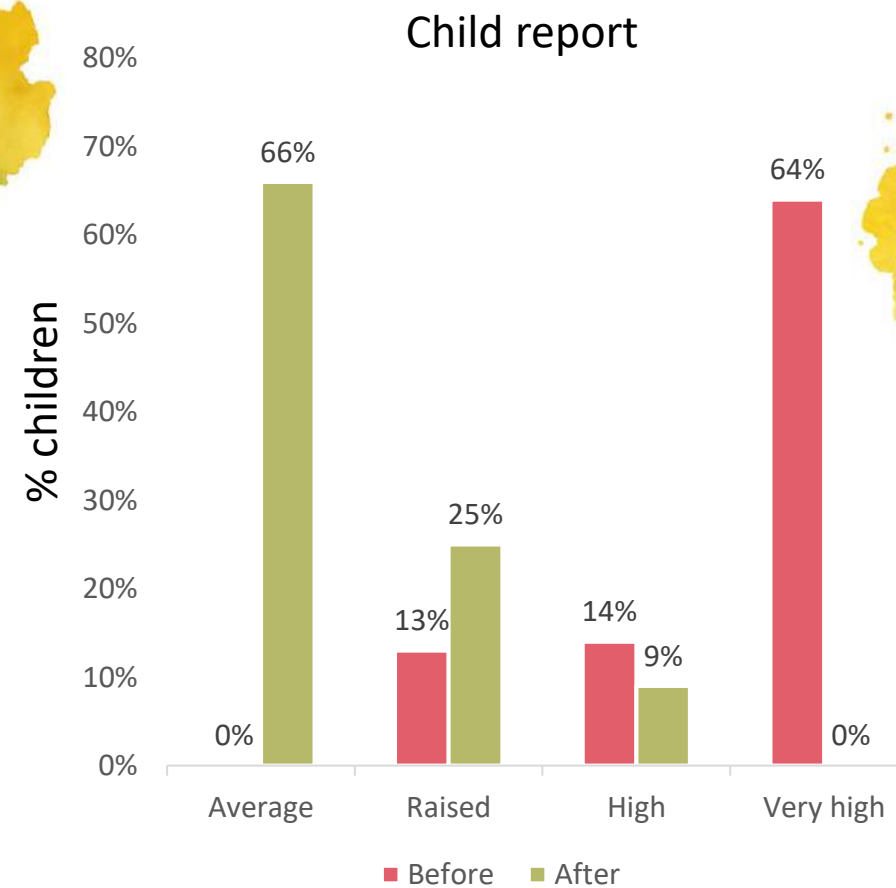
What difference is Curious Beasts making to children's social-emotional mental health (SEMH)?

Changes in SEMH difficulties

Curious Beats evaluation - 11 schools, 172 children. Identified as having 'raised-very high' levels of social-emotional mental health (SEMH) difficulties before Curious Beats

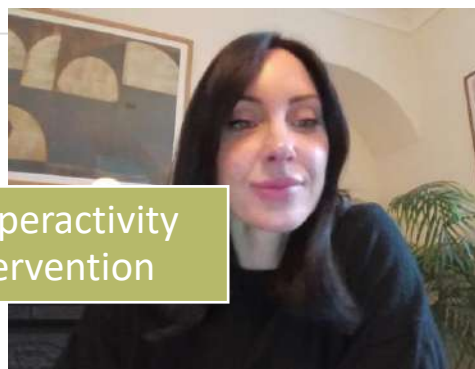


70% OF CHILDREN REDUCED THEIR DEGREE OF SEMH DIFFICULTIES TO AVERAGE RANGE
BASED ON TEACHER-REPORT



66% OF CHILDREN REDUCED THEIR DEGREE OF SEMH DIFFICULTIES TO AVERAGE RANGE
BASED ON CHILD-REPORT

Click to hear Dr Jenna Charlton explain our data



★ Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) positive impact on total (overall) SEMH difficulties, emotional, conduct and hyperactivity difficulties- i.e., less than 5% chance this change is due to chance, and more than 95% chance it is due to intervention

Feedback about Curious Beasts

"The initial workshop was really useful to see how the children saw themselves...The children were really excited about their spirit animal puppets and each child engaged well in nurture sessions, talking about strategies learnt afterwards. We really feel that the children now have so many more [strategies] to support them with their mental health at home and in school."

Teacher, Northwood Primary School Darlington

"My spirit animal helps me when I'm feeling sad and it helped me feel a bit safer when I'm with it"
Child



'He can share his emotions more, his normal behaviour he would go into a "huff", instead he says "its ok mum I just needed time to feel disappointed"
Parent

"My daughter loved her puppet she brought home and used it to tell me all about how it helped her with her worrying. She really likes doing the shape breathing that she came home with too"
Parent

"These sessions have made me feel confident to go to school now"
Child

**Child Health
and Wellbeing
Network**



**North East and
North Cumbria**



**Curious Beasts: Winner of the Chris
Drinkwater Creative Health in Primary
Schools Award 2024-2025**

Part of:

**North East North Cumbria
Health & Care Partnership**



The Chris Drinkwater Creative Health in Primary Schools Awards 2025 - WINNER



Life and Limb Puppets CIC and their 'Curious Beasts' project, an early mental health intervention, in collaboration with **North East Wellbeing** and delivered at **Lemington Riverside Primary School** as one of 12 schools in Newcastle, four in Teesside, one in Sunderland and one in Durham.

What the judges said....

*The panel commented on an **excellent approach to evaluation** and that the project moves effectively from the classroom into the home by the provision of **easily accessible resources**.*

'**Curious Beasts**' immerses vulnerable children in the magic of puppetry, storytelling, and nature to support self-regulation, resilience, peer relations, build confidence, and reduce anxiety. The programme supports children aged 7-10 years old who are at increased risk of social-emotional mental health (SEMH) difficulties due to socio-economic deprivation.

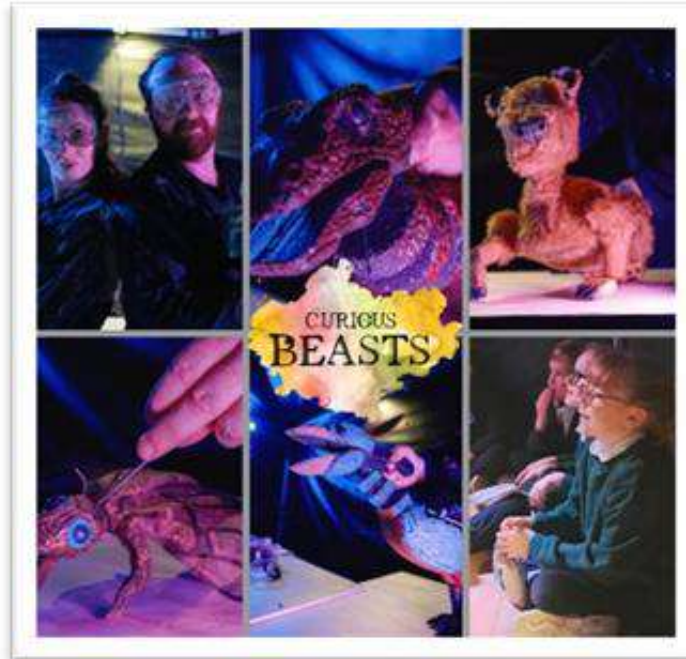


Project summary

Children are immersed in an interactive workshop which introduces them to a world of storytelling and a cast of imaginative characters and their spirit animals (puppets) that embody these characters' social and emotional thoughts and feelings. The workshop acts as a screening tool as the children are asked a series of questions relating to their own social-emotional mental health. These data, coupled with standardised assessment using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire completed by teachers, inform the identification of 12 children most in need of therapeutic support for SEMH; these are children who currently receive no formal support, and are often those whose difficulties are at risk of going undetected. These children receive six nurture sessions tailored to meet individual need, focussing on one or a combination of anxiety, resilience, self-regulation and peer relations.

Why Curious Beasts?

- Need for early and reliable identification of social-emotional mental health needs (SEMH) in children
- Way to amplify and hear the child's own voice
- Providing support for children living in 20% most deprived areas (greater risk of SEMH difficulties)



Creative health benefits of the project

Our approach emerges from educational and psychology research and provides children with a toolkit of strategies to foster personal growth and emotional resilience. Learning is supported through 5 mechanisms:

1. Puppets are used to increase engagement, inspire imagination, and as a psychological and physical distancing tool for self-expression. As well as the puppet workshop, children create their own 'spirit animal' puppet used in nurture sessions.
2. A 'curious mindset' for learning supported by storytelling.
3. 'Curious language', avoiding medicalised language and equipping children with vocabulary to describe feelings.
4. Trust and understanding, cultivated to gain meaningful connections with peers, adults and content.
5. Outdoors - much of the nurture is delivered outdoors where children feel freer to express themselves and nature is used as a therapeutic aid.

These mechanisms equip children with social and emotional security that provides a foundation for educational achievement.

Involving parents and families

Children create their own spirit animal puppet which is used in subsequent sessions to help them to explore emotions, develop coping strategies, and build self-esteem through role play, creative activities and outdoor learning.

Children take home a personalised pack of intervention strategies and a 'child passport' of their preferred mental health strategies to share with their parents/carers, as well as taking their 'spirit animal' puppet home.

Parents/carers can also attend Curious Beasts information sessions and receive an Activity Pack which includes key messages about Curious Beasts, and activities based around supportive strategies that parents/carers and children can carry out together at home.

Addressing health inequalities

Each Curious Beasts programme delivered in a school is evaluated using quantitative and qualitative data collection to ensure that the programme is evidence-based and provides optimum outcomes for children's social-emotional mental health and learning. Since its launch in 2018, Curious Beasts has worked with 20 primary schools in the 20% most deprived localities of the North East region. Evaluation has indicated that the programme has statistically significant positive impact on children's SEMH, including improved emotional, conduct, hyperactivity and peer difficulties. The programme is working towards becoming more sustainable by providing teacher training to deliver Curious Beasts nurture sessions, and expanding its geographical reach, with the ultimate goal of embedding the programme into more schools to benefit more vulnerable children and reduce health inequalities.





North East Wellbeing Website: www.northeastwellbeing.co.uk

We'd love to hear from you! To find out more about Curious Beasts please email:
curiousbeasts@northeastwellbeing.co.uk