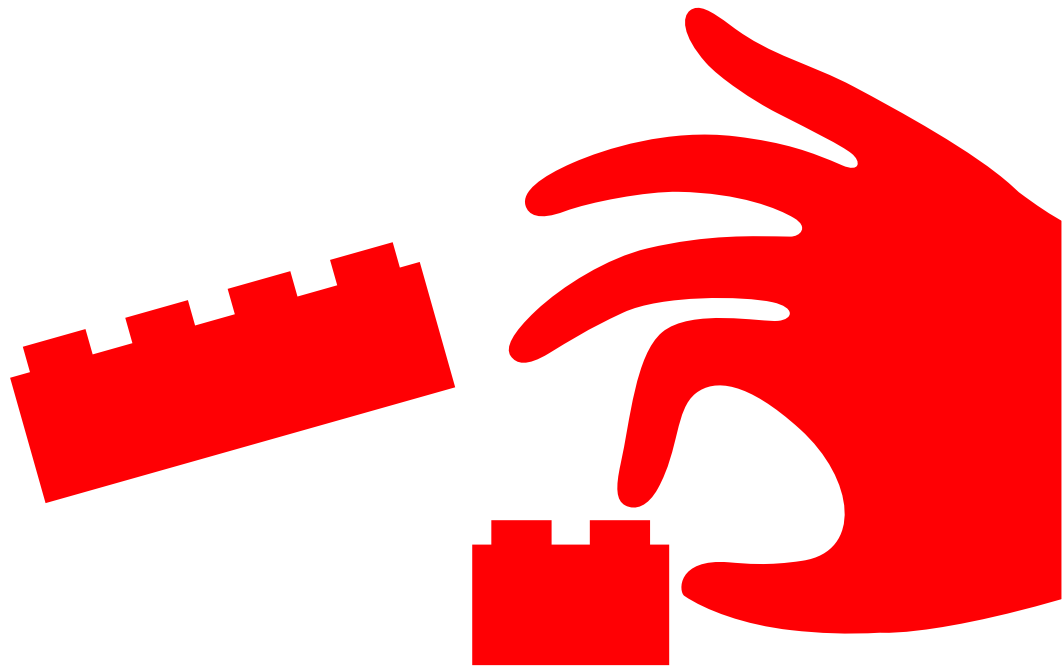


PLAY  
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# Building confidence one brick at a time

The Sensational Learning Centre at the Donaldson Trust is a grant-aided school in West Lothian, Scotland, and provides support to neurodivergent children, and young people.

The Donaldson Trust, the National Body for Neurodiversity that provides individualised and skills-based learning and wellbeing support services for neurodivergent children, young people and adults, decided to implement the evidence-based LEGO® brick based therapy, known as the Brick-by-Brick® programme, after being approached by Play Included®.

Kirsten Lamb, Speech and Language Therapist, at the Trust, notes that: “Not only did the structure of the programme stand out, but we loved the colourful and beautifully designed resources, the step-by-step videos, and the research behind the methodology. LEGO® play is hugely motivational so we knew it would be suitable for many of the children and young people we support.”

## Implementing the Brick-by-Brick® programme

Learning through play and playful facilitation underpin Play Included®’s neurodiversity-affirming Brick-by-Brick® programme. Three of The Donaldson Trust’s team completed the Brick-by-Brick® online,

self-paced programme Certified Facilitator training before completing the one-day in-person Advanced Facilitator course.

Following the completion of their training, the team launched a weekly, hour-long session for students aged 13 to 16 years old. While the Brick-by-Brick® programme is effective for groups of three to twelve children and young people, The Donaldson Trust decided to pilot the programme with a group of three students who would benefit from additional support in a group environment. Kirsten highlights that Play Included®’s training “helps you to identify which students might benefit from the approach.”

The understanding and playful environment of the Brick-by-Brick® programme ensures the sessions are relaxing for students. Kirsten shares some of the benefits of the informal nature of the group sessions: “Everything including the layout of the room changes to create a softer environment, which means that the young people feel much more relaxed and in the mood to learn or talk about things that they might not necessarily volunteer otherwise.”

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## Building communication skills through collaboration

Child-led, collaborative LEGO brick play is an opportunity for the young people at The Donaldson Trust to develop skills such as communication and leadership. Kathleen Cooper, Head Teacher of the Sensational Learning Centre at The Donaldson Trust, describes the communication skills students have learned at the sessions over the past year through collaboration:

**“They’ve been able to gain each other’s attention when they’re giving instructions to one another. Being able to adapt their communication to accommodate other people in the group is one big change that we’ve noticed.”**

The Brick-by-Brick® programme encourages young people to take turns in three different roles during a session: the Supplier, the Builder and the Engineer. Each role challenges different skills and building in roles supports turn-taking, communication and a joint focus on a build. By building LEGO models together, young people can experiment with vocabulary, freely use prepositions to describe the placement of LEGO bricks, and explain to each other how the pieces should connect. One student is proud that he can now confidently get the attention of others by using their name as a prompt, reducing some of the frustrations that he may have experienced before: “by saying their name, they look at me and better understand what they have to find.”



Kirsten appreciates that skills development is facilitated by learning through play and that the young people taking part in the Brick-by-Brick® programme enjoy playing with LEGO bricks together:

**“The students don’t tend to view the sessions as an activity where they have to concentrate, although they are doing it automatically – all while having fun.”**

Importantly, Kathleen notes the emphasis on child-led agency and playful adult facilitation, which is key to successful outcomes for the students: “As an educator, our natural instinct is to scaffold and support but stepping back and allowing young people the opportunity to make their own decisions enables them to develop skills such as problem-solving, communication and leadership.”

## Game-changing confidence

Kirsten notices that by allowing students to strengthen the methods of communication that work best for them, some of their students gain a renewed sense of confidence, which is reflected in both the classroom and their relationships with peers. Some students now spend time together at lunchtime talking and playing football, or forming new friendships outside of school due to their ever-growing confidence.

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Susannah, a parent of one of the participating students, notes the impact of the Brick-by-Brick® programme on her son:

**“In the last year, he’s definitely had a boost in confidence around people. He’s discovered the best way to get things across is to tell people how he feels.”**

Kirsten continues: “Play Included®’s Brick-by-Brick® programme is such a useful tool to aid a wide range of children who need additional support with their communication skills. However, it also provides a safe space for children and young people to feel included, grow in confidence and develop friendships.

I am now looking to use the approach to support the young people attending our VIBE service, who suffer from anxiety. Being around new people can be overwhelming, and many of them find building meaningful friendships challenging so I am looking forward to giving them the opportunity to engage with others in a safe, accepting environment that will help them feel a sense of community.”

Play Included®’s Brick-by-Brick® programme training is available to education professionals in the UK including teaching assistants, teachers, SENCOs and more. Learn more about the training pathway here: <https://playincluded.com/training-programmes>

