



## **UWL REPOSITORY**

**repository.uwl.ac.uk**

Dealing children a helping hand with Book of Beasties: the mental wellness card game

Jayman, Michelle ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0277-4344> and Ventouris, Annita (2020) Dealing children a helping hand with Book of Beasties: the mental wellness card game. *Educational and Child Psychology*, 37 (4). ISSN 0267-1611

**This is the Accepted Version of the final output.**

**UWL repository link:** <https://repository.uwl.ac.uk/id/eprint/6937/>

**Alternative formats:** If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact: [open.research@uwl.ac.uk](mailto:open.research@uwl.ac.uk)

### **Copyright:**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy:** If you believe that this document breaches copyright, please contact us at [open.research@uwl.ac.uk](mailto:open.research@uwl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28

**Dealing children a helping hand with Book of Beasties: The mental wellness card game**

Dr Michelle Jayman and Dr Annita Ventouris

University of West London

Word count without references (excluding tables/figures) 4,140

Word count with references (excluding tables/figures) 5,224

Correspondence should be addressed to Michelle Jayman, University of West London,  
Boston Manor Road, Brentford, Middlesex, TW9 4GA (email: michelle.jayman@uwl.ac.uk)

1 **Abstract**

2 **Aim(s)**

3 Play contributes uniquely to effective learning and the development of socio-emotional skills.  
4 This study investigated Book of Beasties: a school-based, socio-emotional intervention  
5 centred around a card game which aims to improve children’s emotional literacy and  
6 wellbeing through playful learning. Exploratory research was conducted to determine its  
7 potential as an effective resource for school staff and other professionals working in school  
8 settings with responsibility for supporting pupils’ mental health.

9 **Method**

10 A single case study comprised one London primary school. Four children (aged eight to nine  
11 years; two boys and two girls) received the intervention. Qualitative data were collected from  
12 session observations, a focus group with children and semi-structured interviews with school  
13 staff (the delivery agents) and parents/carers. Data were collated and thematically analysed.

14 **Findings**

15 Integrated findings suggested intervention recipients had benefitted in terms of increased  
16 socio-emotional skills and wellbeing. Child and adult participants agreed that Book of  
17 Beasties was valuable and acceptable and thus socially valid. Specific components which  
18 contributed to the intervention’s effectiveness were elicited. These included fantasy elements  
19 of the game and sensory-focused activities.

20 **Limitations.** Data were collected from a single, volunteer school. The class teacher (delivery  
21 agent) selected the children who received the intervention, potentially biasing the findings.

22 **Conclusions**

## BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

1 Exploratory research indicated that Book of Beasties was a promising resource for  
2 practitioners in schools and can contribute to the evidence-based socio-emotional literature. A  
3 full evaluation using both quantitative and qualitative methods was recommended to examine  
4 intervention effectiveness on socio-emotional outcomes, process issues and potential  
5 adaptations.

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

## Introduction

Play in its myriad forms provides a unique channel for stimulating children’s growth and development from infancy to adolescence. The contribution of play to children’s lives is so vital it is recognised by the UN as a right of every child (UN, 1989). Play is broadly defined as displaying features of non-literality, positive affect, flexibility and intrinsic motivation (Krasnor & Pepler, 1980). A body of evidence (e.g. Zosh et al., 2017) supports play’s contribution to learning and the acquisition of physical, cognitive and socio-emotional skills. Hands-on, child directed, playful learning experiences (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009), characteristic of Book of Beasties (BoB), are considered the most effective for enhancing child development.

BoB is a socio-emotional intervention centred around a traditional card game with linked, sensory-focused activities embedded in play. It is delivered in primary schools to children aged 6-11 years in small groups (up to five). Its ethos is underpinned by the belief that every child should have the confidence to talk openly about their emotions and mental health. Its aims are to destigmatise mental health, promote wellbeing and develop emotional literacy: ‘To inspire the conversation, normalise the subject [mental health] and make it less daunting when experiencing difficulties’ (Book of Beasties, 2019, p.2). The intervention is facilitated by school staff who are given introductory training. It can be delivered to general groups or those comprising children identified by practitioners at risk of developing emotional difficulties. Five, one-hour sessions are run over five consecutive weeks. There is an accompanying manual, *The Beastie Guide* which contains five lesson plans. However, these are intentionally flexible to accommodate each group’s unique needs. The manual recommends an introductory session to familiarise players with the characters and rules of the game and a feedback session after the final week. Teachers and parent/carers are invited to complete an evaluation questionnaire.



BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

1 Table 1. Overview of the intervention from *'The Beastie Guide'* (2019)

Beastie	Description	Characteristics	Item card and brief descriptor	Action card activity	Comfort card
Populo	'Everyone has a foggy brain sometimes, especially poor Populo who loses her puff and can't bring herself to do anything' (p.40)	Loss of concentration, low mood	Bellows: 'Our breath has the power to calm us' (p.43)	Make paper boats to race (practising deep breathing and relaxation)	French rabbit (a cuddly toy for physical comfort)
Deki	'Deki is so conscious about how she looks that she goes around borrowing people's clothes to cover up' (p.34)	Worthlessness, isolation, low mood	Gogglys: 'The gogglys show us the best in everyone...you just have to look a little further than skin deep' (p.46)	Discuss notions of beauty and draw what 'inner beauty' looks like	Home (a place of safety and respite)

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

**Literature review**

Recent societal trends have seen a radical shift in the nature of play with a marked decline in playful learning and a concurrent rise in children’s psychological distress (Gray, 2011). Evidence also suggests that over the last 20 years opportunities for free play during the school day have been systematically reduced with shorter break times (Baines & Blatchford, 2019). Spontaneous, child initiated, free play encourages creativity and self-expression and has been positively associated with socio-emotional development (Yogman et al., 2018). A study by Chaudron et al. (2018) revealed that by the age of eight, girls in particular, were ready to abandon play involving physical toys. Digital modes of play have diminished the popularity of conventional toys and games yet produce fewer playful learning opportunities (Healey & Mendelsohn, 2019). They offer limited unscripted interactions and rules which are not easily modified, consequently, children’s social encounters are impoverished (Lancy & Grove, 2011).

In contrast, traditional, practical games, including card games, are highly social. They provide ample opportunities for dispute, cooperation and negotiating the rules (Lancy, 2017). Ethnographic studies have shown these games are less about players understanding the rules and sticking to them and more to do with learning to negotiate (Hughes, 1991). Through these play experiences children develop essential communication skills and practise how to function effectively as social beings.

According to Fisher et al. (2011) children are better equipped to understand narratives and deal with situations in their daily lives when they have experienced similar concepts through play. Pretend play, enacted individually or in a game with others, is positively associated with children’s ability to cope and regulate their emotions (Blair & Raver, 2012). Imagining different experiences can help children manage similar content in real life (Phillips, 2010). A study by Christiano and Russ (1996) compared play habits in a group of

## BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

1 seven- to nine-year-old children who had experienced an invasive dental procedure. Children  
2 who engaged more in fantastical play reported a higher number and variety of coping  
3 strategies and less distress during the procedure than other children.

4 Sociodramatic play also increases children's perspective taking abilities as they  
5 become aware that others have intentions and desires that may not match their own (Hirsch-  
6 Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003). Studies with both young children and adolescents showed that  
7 engaging in fantasy or role play was associated with greater empathy and altruism (White,  
8 2012).

9 Research suggests that guided play with adult scaffolding is more effective for a range  
10 of learning outcomes, including socio-emotional development, than either free play or  
11 didactic methods (Weisberg et al., 2013). Children learn best in interactive environments  
12 which invite them in as active collaborators and contain content they find meaningful (Chi,  
13 2009). Book of Beasties uses a guided learning approach to create a playful learning  
14 experience which supports children's socio-emotional development.

15 Increasing numbers of children and young people are experiencing emotional  
16 difficulties (Sadler et al., 2018). The new relationships and health curriculum (Department for  
17 Education, 2019) places statutory responsibility on state funded schools to promote wellbeing  
18 and mental health, reduce stigma and provide appropriate support for pupils experiencing  
19 difficulties A major challenge for school leaders tasked with implementing prevention  
20 strategies and early intervention initiatives is limited knowledge about the most effective and  
21 appropriate approaches. Robust evaluations are needed to generate case studies of good  
22 practice for schools to share (Brown, 2018). Book of Beasties offers a flexible resource for  
23 practitioners, including educational psychologists, with responsibilities for supporting  
24 children's wellbeing and mental health, but requires formal evaluation. The current study

1 aimed to generate preliminary evidence towards that end and contribute to the growing socio-  
2 emotional intervention literature.

### 3 **Method**

#### 4 **Design**

5 The study was a single case design comprising one west London primary school. An  
6 exploratory method was utilised to establish the feasibility of conducting a full evaluation of  
7 BoB. This approach was supported by methodological literature (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) that  
8 posits the potential value of any new intervention should be tentatively established first. Key  
9 stakeholders' (recipients, staff (delivery agents) and parents/carers) perceptions and  
10 experiences of BoB were investigated.

11 Qualitative methods comprised researcher observations of the five BoB sessions, a  
12 focus group with intervention recipients, interviews in person with staff delivery agents and  
13 telephone interviews with parents/carers of children who received the intervention.

#### 14 **Participants**

15 Child participants comprised primary school pupils (aged eight to nine years; two  
16 boys and two girls). Adult participants were two school staff (delivery agents) and four  
17 parents/carers.

#### 18 **Procedure**

19 Full ethical approval was granted by the university ethics committee. Written consent  
20 was provided by the head teacher, parents/carers and adult participants. All sessions were run  
21 consecutively by school staff in line with the manual and were observed by one or both  
22 researchers. A focus group with children was facilitated by Researcher A and audio recorded  
23 two weeks after the intervention finished. The focus group incorporated a drawing activity to  
24 gather non-verbal data. Interviews in person with staff delivery agents and telephone  
25 interviews with parents/carers were conducted by Researcher B within two weeks of the

1 intervention finishing. Data were thematically analysed using a six-phase guided approach  
2 (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

3 **Findings**

4 Four thematic categories and eight subthemes were generated from focus group and  
5 interview data. Observational data were integrated and subsumed within organised themes to  
6 contextualise the exploratory framework. Thematic categories (Table 2 and Table 3) and a  
7 supporting narrative analysis (pseudonyms were used) are presented.

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

1 Table 2. Children’s perceptions and experience of BoB

Thematic category	Subtheme	Illustrative quotation	Illustrative quotation
Making sense of BoB	Perceptions of purpose	‘We could help them [the beasties], then they didn’t have worries’ (Dave)	‘You help her [Deki beastie] to know that she’s really beautiful’ (Bea)
	Perceptions of play rules	‘If you get a beastie, you can help it with a comfort card’ (Bea)	‘As we did more sessions I kind of slowly understood it’ (Olivia)
Fantasy world component vs. real world component	Pretend level engagement	‘I feel it’s nice to help [the beasties], to encourage them to do something even though I don’t get encouraged well’ (Olivia)	‘He [Bronze Child beastie] is sometimes stressed ... and I think it’s worth helping him’ (Dave)
	Literal level engagement	‘I kind of just find drawing really calming...it’s also really fun’ (Olivia)	
Knowledge and application of socio-	Language and awareness	‘He’s [Bronze Child beastie] so cute and	It’s kind of annoying that people try to change themselves to fit in....you



BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

1 Table 3. Staff and parents/carers’ perceptions and experience of BoB

Thematic category	Subtheme	Illustrative quotation (staff)	Illustrative quotation (parents/carers)
Making sense of BoB	Perceptions of purpose	‘The aim was clear- it is all about helping children, their wellbeing’ (Kate)	‘I thought it would help him open up to us...he doesn’t like to talk a lot and he is always keeping things to himself’ (Pauline)
	Perceptions of play rules	‘You really need to get your head around the cards first. It took me a couple of times before I felt confident’(Sue)	
Knowledge and application of socio-emotional literacy	Language and awareness	‘I don’t think [the child] spoke about his own emotions or feelings and what makes him feel good [before] and I think this was actually really nice for him to reflect on that’ (Sue)	‘His whole outlook on actions has changed, as has the way that he views those around him’ (Kelly)
	Strategies of support/	‘She is going to use the breathing technique in class	‘By trying to help the beasties...he focused on

BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

coping when she gets these feelings solutions rather than  
 mechanisms to help her calm down’ reacting directly to the  
 for self and (Sue) behaviour or judging it’  
 others (Kelly)

Assessment Perceptions ‘It was an effective ‘My husband and I were not  
 and of value and intervention. [Children] prepared for the dramatic  
 development acceptance wanted to come. There was [positive] transformation we  
 of BoB a structure... which was saw in our son over the past  
 easy for us to pick up every few months’ (Kelly)  
 week’ (Sue)

Building a ‘I liked the lesson plans, but ‘I think it helped her, but  
 better BoB I did find the book slightly something like this needs to  
 experience confusing’ (Kate) be ongoing’ (Nikki)

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8

1 **Making sense of BoB**

2 Children demonstrated their understanding of BoB on both a conceptual and practical  
3 level. The subthemes, ‘Perceptions of purpose’ and ‘Perceptions of play rules’ encapsulate  
4 these two components respectively. In terms of the game’s objective, the notion of helping  
5 the beasties was commonly understood: ‘The beasties were like people and they had worries  
6 [and we] try to help them to come up with ways to solve their problems’ (Olivia).

7 Participants identified their favourite beastie and demonstrated empathy with the  
8 particular worries of the character. Some children reported these as mirroring their own  
9 concerns, for example, having a ‘foggy brain’ (Bea) or ‘feeling stressed’ (Pug). Visually, the  
10 beasties appear androgynous, although accompanying descriptions specify gender. Three of  
11 the four children chose a favourite beastie the same gender as themselves. In the focus group  
12 drawing activity children were invited to create their own beastie and/or design a comfort  
13 item. Children’s designs demonstrated their conceptual understanding. For example,  
14 descriptions of their beasties included: ‘Everyone makes fun of him’; ‘He is left out most of  
15 the time’ (Pug) and ‘She gets anxious about things and activities’ (Olivia). Comfort items  
16 included a pair of colourful headphones for listening to soothing music (Bea) and a terra  
17 block (brick) that ‘protects him [the beastie] from negative comments and helps him calm  
18 down’ (Pug).

19 Games are distinct from other types of playful learning (e.g. free play) as children  
20 compete according to rules and the objective is usually to win. Although BoB has game rules,  
21 play is intentionally flexible to suit different interests and accommodate discussions and  
22 wellbeing activities. Observational data indicated some children (and staff) were unsure how  
23 to use the cards at the start and they later revealed not fully understanding all the rules.  
24 Nonetheless, children were sufficiently engaged in play that this was not of particular concern

1 to them and did not hinder enjoyment. A critical component of learning through play is  
2 agency (Zosh et al., 2017) and children demonstrated their ability to negotiate the rules and  
3 continue play. This suggests their desire to be supported rather than directed by adults.

4 Staff and parent/carer accounts revealed they understood BoB's aim was to support  
5 children's wellbeing and encourage conversations about emotions and feelings. Staff reports  
6 also confirmed their initial difficulties with following the game. In contrast to the children,  
7 staff were more concerned with knowing the rules, for example when a type of card should  
8 be picked or when players could swap cards. Nevertheless, they allowed children to play  
9 according to their own version of these rules. Studies on the various roles adults can occupy  
10 within children's play have indicated that sensitivity to the child's needs in the moment is  
11 paramount (White, 2012). Therefore, adults should be flexible in the manner they intervene  
12 and always willing to take the child's lead and this was demonstrated.

13 Delivery agents' training and understanding of an intervention are imperative to the  
14 quality of implementation and treatment fidelity and thus inextricably linked to programme  
15 outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). In line with the guided learning approach, staff delivering  
16 BoB initiated the learning process and set the structure for each session. For example, they  
17 identified which beasts to look out for during play, however, the children were continuously  
18 active in their own learning.

### 19 **Fantasy world component vs real world component**

20 This thematic category refers to components of the intervention which encouraged  
21 children to engage and contribute to its effectiveness. 'Pretend level engagement' comprises  
22 the imaginary aspect of BoB which absorbs children in pretend play. Children knowingly and  
23 intentionally participated in a mentally represented alternative reality: 'I like the one [Beastie]  
24 who goes into people's homes to get their clothes [Deki wants to change her appearance]...

## BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

1 you can help her to know that she's really beautiful' (Bea). The notion of heroically entering  
2 the beastie world was appealing to children who were enthusiastic in the pretense: 'I liked the  
3 beasties and how you can help them, I liked helping them' (Olivia).

4 While research (Drewes & Schaefer, 2016) suggests overt pretending diminishes  
5 significantly in middle childhood, other studies (Bergen & Williams, 2008) indicate older  
6 children are increasingly inclined to engage in fantasy play in the context of popular digital  
7 games. The imaginary world of BoB introduces fantasy characters and players are tasked  
8 with a mission to help the beasties through problem solving and collaboration. Pretend play  
9 in BoB is inherently social as children work together in an alternative reality, practising  
10 social skills and cooperation. According to Hughes (1991), when children engage in social  
11 play, cooperation goals and maintaining harmony within the group takes precedence over  
12 competitive, individual goals. Through social games children learn how to function as a team.  
13 In the case of BoB, collectively helping as many beasties as possible was how success was  
14 broadly perceived by children rather than acknowledging a single winner.

15 Reality is suppressed through pretending and children develop inhibitory control and  
16 self-regulation, including levels of emotional arousal (Blair & Raver, 2012; Bodrova &  
17 Leong, 1996). As posited by Fisher et al. (2011) and Phillips (2010), pretending about  
18 specific content helps children cope with similar events in real life: 'If I had a friend [like  
19 Akky with low self-esteem] I'd tell them they don't have to worry about how they look and  
20 about what other people think of them and just remember they should just be happy' (Olivia).  
21 Overall, children were sympathetic towards the Beasties, demonstrating perspective taking  
22 abilities (Hirsch-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2003). Their responses were consistently prosocial and  
23 supportive, including from Olivia who admitted feeling unsupported herself when she needed  
24 encouragement in a real life situation.

1           ‘Literal level engagement’ refers to the verbal and practical tasks linked to play which  
2     comprise discussions (e.g. about emotions or difficulties) and wellbeing activities (e.g. yoga  
3     and mindfulness). Observations showed the children were willing to participate in all of these  
4     aspects of the intervention and the activities were unanimously described as fun. A popular  
5     game was racing paper boats (by blowing through straws) and although designed to practise  
6     deep breathing, the emphasis was on having fun and nobody seemed to mind who won.

7           The wellbeing exercises used in BoB are sensory focused and involve active learning.  
8     According to Durlak et al. (2011) participatory elements which concentrate on developing  
9     specific skills (e.g. self-regulation) are integral to socio-emotional interventions. A review by  
10    Burke (2010) concluded that interventions which incorporate mindfulness practices were  
11    accepted and well tolerated by children. A body of research supports mindfulness training  
12    (Napoli, 2005), yoga (Hagen & Nayar, 2014) and art activities (Irwin, 2006) for reducing  
13    stress and improving wellbeing, especially when delivered in a non-prescribed manner such  
14    as through play.

15           Children’s perceptions of their contribution to the game’s development as valued  
16    emerged as a meaningful factor. Players were invited to donate designs for novel comfort  
17    items for possible future iterations of the game. Incorporating follow-up activities may retain  
18    children’s engagement with BoB and help sustain any positive effects from the intervention.

### 19    **Knowledge and application of socio-emotional literacy**

20           This theme relates to children’s socio-emotional development and was subdivided  
21    into ‘Language and awareness’ and ‘Strategies of support/coping mechanisms for self and  
22    others’. Children demonstrated a mature and sensitive awareness of the socio-emotional  
23    issues brought into focus through play and the problems manifested by the beasties. An  
24    understanding of terms like ‘self-esteem’ and ‘stress’ was demonstrated: ‘When you’re

## BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

1 stressed it kind of affects your life' (Dave). A grasp of concepts such as 'inner beauty' and  
2 the importance of 'just being happy' (Bea) was revealed. This was supported by a parent's  
3 observation: 'She said that the things that matter the most are kindness, honesty, being nice to  
4 other people and not your size' (Nikki).

5 In addition to a semantic understanding, children showed signs of personal emotional  
6 awareness. For example, Pug described a beastie as having the same problems as him and  
7 Bea suggested: 'It helps us to talk about our feelings'. The second subtheme is closely related  
8 to children's awareness and understanding and refers to the application of socio-emotional  
9 learning. Children proposed several self-directed coping mechanisms for when they felt  
10 worried or stressed, citing personal preferences (e.g. yoga tree stance, drawing and deep  
11 breathing exercises): 'I also sometimes have a foggy brain. I need to take a deep breath in and  
12 so does Populo [beastie]' (Bea). Strategies for supporting peers experiencing difficulties were  
13 also suggested: 'I would go and play with them...try and get their mind of it' (Bea) and 'I  
14 would probably just talk to them and it would make them happy' (Dave). Children's  
15 responses revealed a proactive, problem solving approach to help peers in real life; the same  
16 tactics they had employed to help the beasties.

17 Staff commented on children's prosocial behaviour during sessions, for example,  
18 helping if a peer had difficulty understanding a card or task. Parent/carer reports indicated  
19 that children were demonstrating new socio-emotional skills at home: 'I noticed she became  
20 more empathetic with her friends and even other children' (Nikki). Outside the sessions staff  
21 had observed children applying some of the yoga poses and breathing exercises in situations  
22 when experiencing mild stress (e.g. before a test). Staff accounts also suggested an impact on  
23 children's behaviour in the classroom after the intervention: 'She seems a lot more talkative  
24 and more confident in class, not just in the group' (Kate). Review evidence suggests that

1 socio-emotional skills are associated with positive behaviour in the classroom (e.g. high  
2 levels of attention and engagement) and academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011).

### 3 **Assessment and development of BoB**

4 The final theme comprises stakeholders' perceptions of BoB as a valuable and  
5 acceptable intervention and includes suggestions for improvements and development.

6 Children described their experience of BoB as fun and reported an increase in  
7 wellbeing: 'It cheered me up a lot' (Pug). Observational data showed children were engaged  
8 and motivated during the sessions. A body of research (Howard & McInnes, 2013; Sawyer,  
9 2017) has shown when children perceive an activity as play they are more engaged and  
10 motivated and display higher wellbeing. Children explained how using some of the activities  
11 was helpful: 'Every time I get annoyed or when I couldn't sleep I took deep breaths and it  
12 really helped 'cos it calmed me down' (Olivia) and 'It helps you to relax, to do a tree pose  
13 [yoga stance]' (Bea).

14 Children offered their suggestions for improvements. For example, designing a mini  
15 rule book to enhance players understanding of the game and keeping a tally of group  
16 successes to increase satisfaction: 'When you help a beastie, put it in a separate pile and at the  
17 end you can count that pile and see how many you've [the group] saved' (Olivia).

18 Overall, staff and parents/carers views aligned with the children's and they considered  
19 BoB beneficial. For staff, it was a useful tool for promoting and supporting children's mental  
20 health and could be adapted to the unique needs of different groups. Staff identified the  
21 wellbeing activities as one of the most important parts of the intervention: 'I think they gave  
22 every child the opportunity to express themselves creatively' (Sue). The perceived need for  
23 any intervention and its acceptability from staff and parents/carers are considered crucial  
24 factors in its success (Lendrum et al., 2013). Staff revealed they were planning to incorporate

1 some of the activities (e.g. yoga stances and breathing exercises) in their lessons. Sue was  
2 keen to point out the potential for tailoring the activities so they could be adopted more  
3 widely across the school curriculum: ‘I think any class can tailor them, maybe not the card  
4 game itself, but you can tailor the activities’ (Sue).

5 Staff recommended clearer guidelines and more time initially to introduce emotions,  
6 as some children were described as more emotionally literate than others. Both staff and  
7 parents/carers concurred that ongoing provision or support was needed to sustain and enhance  
8 the initial benefits children had gained from attending the brief, five-week intervention. This  
9 corresponds with research suggesting that for optimal impact, socio-emotional learning needs  
10 to be embedded within a whole school, multi modal approach (Goldberg et al., 2018).

### 11 **Limitations**

12 The current study had several strengths, including the use of multiple methods and an  
13 explicit and open research process, however, there were limitations. The methodological  
14 weakness arising from research activities being conducted by different researchers was  
15 addressed by cross validating codes and themes generated from the analyses. High  
16 concordance between researchers was established with minor revisions to labels of some  
17 themes. A further limitation concerns the fact measures were not implemented to ascertain  
18 the degree to which socio-emotional development could be attributed solely to the  
19 intervention. The participant school (in a prosperous west London area) volunteered to  
20 participate in the study thus data were collected from a single, research-friendly school.  
21 Moreover, the class teacher was responsible for selecting children which introduced  
22 additional risk of bias.

### 23 **Conclusions**

## BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

1           The aim of this exploratory research was to determine the feasibility of a full  
2 evaluation of Book of Beasties and this was supported. Findings suggested BoB had  
3 benefitted recipients in terms of increased socio-emotional skills and wellbeing and was a  
4 socially valid intervention. Potential underpinning mechanisms (e.g. reality inhibition  
5 associated with the fantasy element of the game) and specific procedures (e.g. sensory-  
6 focused, therapeutic activities) were identified as contributing to successful outcomes.

7           Children's unique contribution to evaluating interventions targeted at them was  
8 recognised in the current study. Research suggests children are better informants than either  
9 parents/carers or teachers on measures gauging emotional symptoms (Jellesma et al., 2007).  
10 However, a multi-informant approach increases methodological rigour (Goodman et al.,  
11 2000) and is recommended for a full evaluation of BoB using both quantitative and  
12 qualitative methods.

13           Play experiences are essential for healthy child development and practical games offer  
14 an important pedagogical tool for socio-emotional development. Children are engaged when  
15 content is interesting and meaningful (Hassinger-Das et al., 2017) and they are active  
16 collaborators in the learning experience (Chi, 2009). Aligned with this playful learning  
17 approach, BoB is a promising socio-emotional intervention for primary schools. It can be  
18 delivered by a range of practitioners including class teachers, learning mentors and emotional  
19 literacy support assistants and others working in school settings such as educational  
20 psychologists. This flexibility may relieve implementation issues in schools such as waiting  
21 times for interventions due to limited specialist resources.

22           The views of staff and parents/carers, as well as recipients, help inform school leaders  
23 and others tasked with intervention implementation decisions. BoB's non-prescriptive design  
24 was desirable to recipients and staff delivery agents. The potential to extrapolate elements of

1 the intervention for use across the curriculum, identified by staff, suggests BoB can be  
2 integrated within a school's existing mental health strategy. However, staff voiced areas for  
3 improvement, including clearer guidelines. Some practitioners would benefit from training  
4 beyond a basic introduction to the game and linked activities, which is currently offered. For  
5 example, training in socio-emotional development with on-going support. Additional support  
6 could also be provided from the developers or more experienced fellow practitioners.  
7 Children's recommendations were centred around enhancing recipients' experience and  
8 provide valuable feedback for future developments.

9 As previously stated, the number of children experiencing emotional difficulties has  
10 grown (Sadler et al., 2018). Greater attention to preventative approaches and early  
11 intervention, referred to as 'low level' mental health services, has been strongly  
12 recommended (Children's Commissioner, 2019). The pivotal role of schools in this process  
13 has been well documented (Department of Health (DH) and Department for Education (DfE),  
14 2017). Decision makers should rely on the strength of the evidence to ensure the most  
15 effective and appropriate interventions are selected and case studies of good practice are  
16 needed (Brown, 2018). A full evaluation of Book of Beasties has been proposed to examine  
17 intervention effects on socio-emotional outcomes and process issues to contribute to this  
18 evidence base. Additional research is needed to investigate intervention effects on different  
19 subpopulations. Potential adaptations of BoB to suit the needs and local resources of specific  
20 school environments and alternative delivery locations (e.g. health/community settings) also  
21 warrant consideration. Further research is intended to contribute to the burgeoning socio-  
22 emotional intervention literature and help ensure evidence-led practice is informed by robust  
23 evidence-based research.

24 **References**

## BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

- 1 Baines, E. & Blatchford, P. (2019). *School break and lunch times and young people's social*  
2 *lives: A follow-up national study*. London: UCL Institute of Education.
- 3 Bergen, D. & Williams, E. (2008). *Differing childhood play experiences of young adults*  
4 *compared to earlier young adult cohorts have implications for physical, social, and*  
5 *academic development*. Chicago: Association for Psychological Science.
- 6 Blair, C. & Raver, C.C. (2012). Child development in the context of adversity: Experiential  
7 canalization of brain and behavior. *American Psychologist*, 67(4), 309–318.
- 8 Bodrova, E. & Leong, D. (1996). *Tools of the mind: The Vygotskian approach to early*  
9 *childhood education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Merrill.
- 10 Book of Beasties (2019). *The Beastie Guide*. London: Book of Beasties Ltd.
- 11 Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for*  
12 *beginners*. London: Sage.
- 13 Brown, R. (2018). *Mental health and wellbeing provision in schools: Review of published*  
14 *policies and information*. London: Department for Education.
- 15 Burke, C. (2010). Mindfulness-based approaches with children and adolescents: A  
16 preliminary review of current research in an emergent field. *Journal of Child and*  
17 *Family Studies*, 19, 133-144.
- 18 Chaudron, S., Di Gioia, R. & Gemo, M. (2018). Young children (0-8) and digital technology:  
19 A qualitative study across Europe. Brussels: Publication Office of the EU.
- 20 Chi, M.T. (2009). Active-constructive-interactive: A conceptual framework for  
21 differentiating learning activities. *Topics in Cognitive Science*, 1(1), 73-105.

## BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

- 1 Children's Commissioner (2019). *Early access to mental health support*. London: Children's  
2 Commissioner.
- 3 Christiano, B.A. & Russ, S.W. (1996). Play as a predictor of coping and distress in children  
4 during an invasive dental procedure. *Journal of Child Clinical Psychology*, 25, 130–8.
- 5 Department for Education (DfE) (2019). *Relationships education, relationships and sex  
6 education (RSE) and health education*. London: Crown.
- 7 Department of Health (DoH) and Department for Education (DfE) (2017). *Transforming  
8 children and young people's mental health provision: A green paper*. London: Crown.
- 9 Drewes, A.A. & Schaefer, C.E. (2016). *Play therapy in middle childhood*. Washington, DC:  
10 American Psychological Association.
- 11 Durlak, J.A. & DuPre, E.P. (2008). Implementation matters: A review of research on the  
12 influence of implementation on program outcomes and the factors affecting  
13 implementation. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 41(3–4), 327–350.
- 14 Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B. et al. (2011). The impact of enhancing  
15 students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal  
16 interventions. *Child Development*, 82(1), 405-432.
- 17 Fisher, K., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R.M. et al. (2011). Playing around in school:  
18 Implications for learning and educational policy. In A. Pellegrini (Ed.) *The Oxford  
19 handbook of play* (pp.341-363). New York: Oxford University Press.
- 20 Goldberg, J.M., Sklad, M., Elfrink, T.R. et al. (2018). Effectiveness of interventions adopting  
21 a whole school approach to enhancing social and emotional development: A meta-  
22 analysis. *European Journal of Psychology of Education*, 34(4), 755–782.

23

## BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

- 1 Goodman, R., Ford, T., Simmons, H. et al. (2000). Using the Strengths and Difficulties  
2 Questionnaire (SDQ) to screen for child psychiatric disorders in a community sample.  
3 *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 177(6), 534-539.
- 4 Gray, P. (2011). The decline of play and the rise of psychopathology in children and  
5 adolescents. *American Journal of Play*, 3(4), 43-463.
- 6 Hagen, I. & Nayar, U.S. (2014). Yoga for children and young people's mental health and  
7 well-being: Research review and reflections on the mental health potentials of yoga.  
8 *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 5:35. doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2014.00035.
- 9 Hassinger-Das, B., Toub, T.S., Zosh, J.M. et al. (2017). More than just fun: A place for  
10 games in playful learning. *Journal for the Study of Education and Development*, 40(2),  
11 191-218.
- 12 Healey, A. & Mendelsohn, A. (2019). Selecting appropriate toys for young children in the  
13 digital era. *Pediatrics*, 143(1), e20183348. doi: 10.1542/peds.2018-3348.
- 14 Hirsh-Pasek, K. & Golinkoff, R.M. (2003). *Einstein never used flash cards: How our*  
15 *children really learn and why they need to play more and memorize less*. Rodale, NY:  
16 Emmaus, PA.
- 17 Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R., Berk, L. et al. (2009). *A mandate for playful learning in*  
18 *preschool: Presenting the evidence*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- 19 Howard, J. & McInnes, K. (2013). The impact of children's perception of an activity as play  
20 rather than not play on emotional well-being. *Child: Care, Health and Development*,  
21 39(5), 737-742.
- 22 Hughes, L. (1991). A conceptual framework for the study of children's gaming. *Play and*  
23 *Culture*, 4(3), 284-301.

## BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

- 1 Irwin, E.C. (2006). Peter: A study of cumulative trauma, from “robot” to “regular guy”. In  
2 L. Carey (Ed.) *Expressive and creative arts methods for trauma survivors* (pp.93–113).  
3 Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- 4 Jellesma, F.C., Rieffe, C. & Terwogt, M.M. (2007). The somatic complaint list: Validation of  
5 a self-report questionnaire assessing somatic complaints in children. *Journal of*  
6 *Psychosomatic Research*, 63(4), 399-401.
- 7 Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future.  
8 *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10(2), 144-156.
- 9 Krasnor, L.R. & Pepler, D.J. (1980). The study of children’s play: Some suggested future  
10 directions. In K.H. Rubin (Ed.) *Children’s play: New directions for child development*  
11 (pp.85–95). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- 12 Lancy, D.F. (2017). *Raising children: Surprising insights from other cultures*. Cambridge:  
13 Cambridge University Press.
- 14 Lancy, D.F. & Grove, M.A. (2011). Marbles and Machiavelli: The role of game play in  
15 children’s social development. *American Journal of Play*, 3(4), 489-499.
- 16 Lendrum, A., Humphrey, N. & Wigelsworth, M. (2013). Social and emotional aspects of  
17 learning (SEAL) for secondary schools: Implementation difficulties and their  
18 implications for school-based mental health promotion. *Child and Adolescent Mental*  
19 *Health*, 18(3), 158–164.
- 20 Napoli, M. (2005). Mindfulness training for elementary school students: The attention  
21 academy. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 21(1), 99–125.
- 22 Phillips, R.D. (2010). How firm is our foundation? Current play therapy research.  
23 *International Journal of Play Therapy*, 19(1), 13–25.

## BOOK OF BEASTIES: THE MENTAL WELLNESS CARD GAME

- 1 Sadler, K., Vizard, T., Ford, T. et al. (2018). *Mental health of children and young people in*  
2 *England, 2017: Trends and characteristics*. Leeds, UK: NHS Digital.
- 3 Sawyer, J. (2017). I think I can: Preschoolers' private speech and motivation in playful versus  
4 non-playful contexts. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 38, 84–96.
- 5 Seligman, M.E.P. & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction.  
6 *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 5-14.
- 7 UN (1989). *Convention on the rights of the child*. Geneva: United Nations.
- 8 Weisberg, D.S., Hirsh-Pasek, K. & Golinkoff, R.M. (2013). Guided play: Where curricular  
9 goals meet a playful pedagogy. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, 7, 104–112.
- 10 White, R. (2012). *The power of play: A research summary on play and learning*. Minnesota:  
11 Minnesota Children's Museum.
- 12 Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J. et al. (2018). The power of play: A pediatric role in  
13 enhancing development in young children. *Pediatrics*, 142(3), 1–17.
- 14 Zosh, J.M., Hopkins, E.J., Jensen, H. et al. (2017). *Learning through play: A review of the*  
15 *evidence*. Denmark: The Lego Foundation.