

With Kids

Watch, Wait and Wonder – Evaluation Report

Introduction

Watch, Wait and Wonder is an evidence-based, child-led psychotherapeutic approach that strengthens the relationship between infants, young children and their parents or carers. It supports adults to better understand children's emotional communications by observing, reflecting and following the child's lead.

At With Kids, we deliver Watch, Wait and Wonder in nursery and community settings, creating a calm, consistent space where children can explore freely through play. This approach centres the **voice of the child**, recognising that in the early years, children communicate their experiences, needs and feelings through behaviour and play.

By stepping back from directing or leading, adults develop a deeper understanding of each child's emotional world. This strengthens their ability to respond sensitively, supporting secure attachment, emotional regulation and a growing sense of agency in the child.

How the Programme Works

Each session lasts one hour:

- 30 minutes of child-led play in small groups while parents or staff observe
- 30 minutes of structured parental reflection with parents or staff

Children are offered a consistent space, with the same toys, time and structure each week. Adults do not direct the play unless invited by the child. Instead, they observe, reflect and "wonder" about what the child may be experiencing.

This creates a safe, predictable environment where children can:

- Explore at their own pace
- Build confidence and independence
- Process experiences through play
- Develop relationships with peers

Outcomes for Children

Watch, Wait and Wonder supports improvements across key areas of early childhood development:

- Curiosity and exploration
- Independence and confidence
- Emotional regulation
- Peer and adult relationships
- Concentration and focus
- Sense of agency

It is particularly beneficial for children who are:

- Withdrawn or isolated
- Experiencing separation anxiety
- Lacking confidence
- Struggling with communication or independence

Impact

A total of **96 children (aged 2–7)** participated.

Using a structured assessment approach based on the Leuven Scale:

- **88% of children showed improved overall wellbeing**
- **96% showed improved involvement in play and activity**

Staff consistently observed that children behaved differently within the sessions compared to the wider nursery environment. For example, children who would normally struggle with sharing were able to wait; quiet or withdrawn children became more vocal; shy children showed increased confidence and curiosity

“The children responded differently... if another child had something they wanted, they would wait. In the big room there would have been a fight.”

Deeper Impact

Quantitative measures did not always capture the full impact.

For example, *Mara* appeared outwardly withdrawn throughout the sessions and did not show measurable improvement within the group. However, nursery staff observed significant changes outside the sessions:

- Increased confidence
- Expanded peer relationships
- Greater willingness to make independent choices

This highlights how the programme supports **internal changes**—such as resilience, confidence and sense of self—which may not always be immediately visible.

Case Studies

Kyle (age 2)

Initially withdrawn and non-verbal in nursery, Kyle observed and mirrored others in early sessions. Through consistent, child-led interaction, he began to initiate communication (speaking for the first time in session), lead play and express his needs. These changes extended into the nursery environment, where he became more vocal, engaged and confident.

Aaliyah (age 4)

Aaliyah struggled with independence and relied heavily on adult support. Over time, she built the confidence to engage in play independently, asserted her needs within the group and began exploring new activities. These changes transferred into nursery life, where she became more confident and less dependent on her key worker.

Impact on Staff Practice

18 staff members participated.

The programme had a significant impact on staff understanding of children's capabilities and emotional needs. Many described it as transformative:

"It was an eye opener... children can resolve problems and develop friendships without adult involvement."

"I observe more now and give children time to make their own decisions."

Staff reported:

- Increased confidence in stepping back and observing
- Greater understanding of children's emotional communication
- A shift towards more child-led, relational practice

Conclusion

Watch, Wait and Wonder demonstrates the power of **early, relationship-based intervention**. By creating space for children to lead, explore and communicate through play, the programme strengthens emotional development, resilience and secure relationships.

For children growing up in challenging circumstances, this approach supports the foundations of healthy development—helping them build confidence, regulate emotions and develop a strong sense of self.