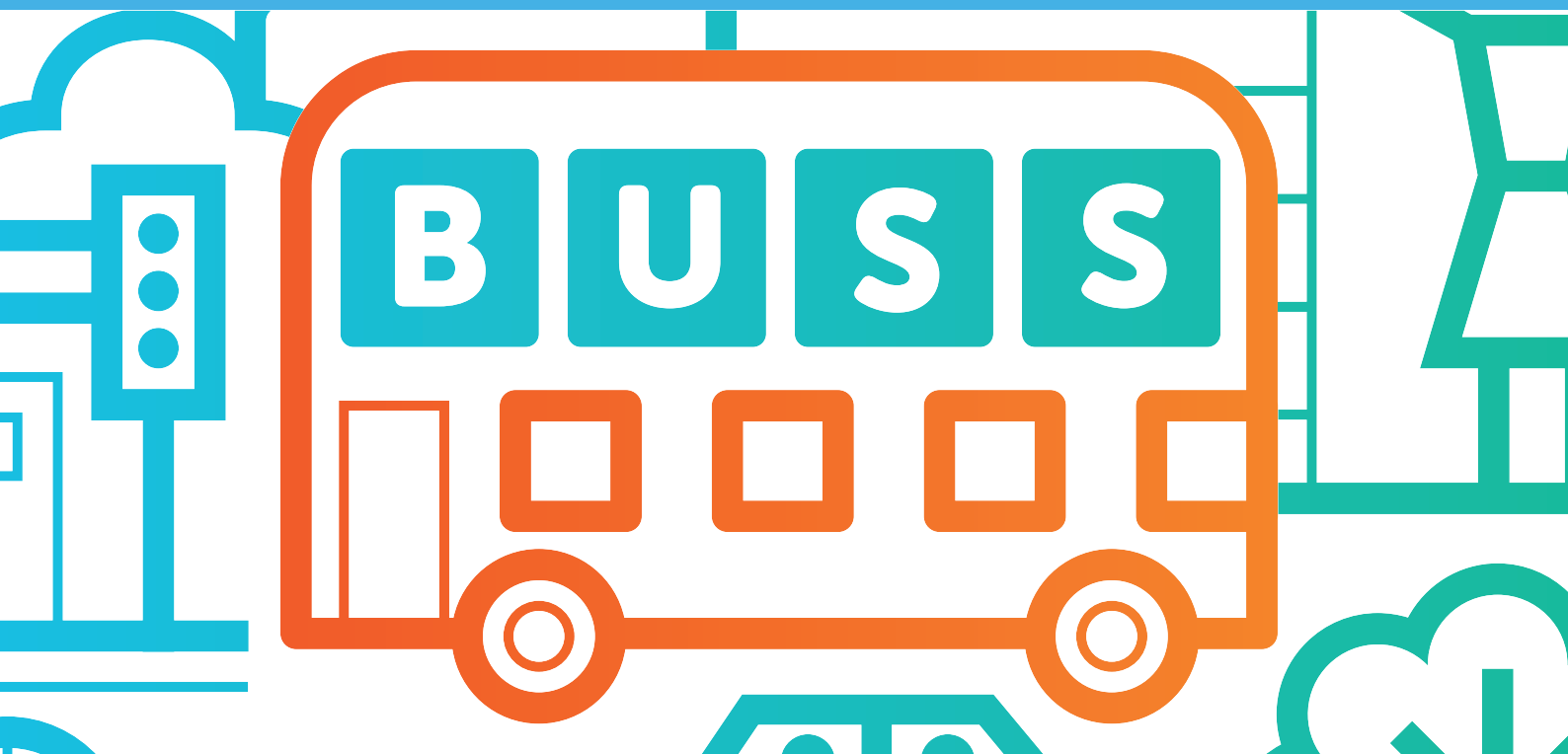


Evaluating the Impact of BUSS LEAPlets®
Early Intervention Groupwork
on Children who have Experienced
Developmental Trauma,
their Foster Carers and Social Workers
Summary Report



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What this Report is About

This report is a summary of the main findings from a study that was completed by two researchers, Dr. Leigh-Ann Sweeney and Dr. Lisa Moran in 2025 and 2026, which evaluated the BUSS LEAPlets® programme as implemented by the Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA). In 2024, IFCA implemented a pilot of BUSS LEAPlets®, a movement-based intervention for children who experienced neglect and abuse, which has become increasingly popular in the UK. An evaluation is a type of study which looks at how programmes worked, what worked well and how they might be improved for the future.

This summary document is a plain English, shorter version of the main document which contains very extensive findings. The main purpose of this summary report is to outline the research and provide the key findings in an accessible and user-friendly way for stakeholders including foster carers.

As part of our research, we interviewed foster carers, social workers, BUSS LEAPlets® facilitators and key informants to garner their opinions about the pilot. We focused mainly on the following:

- Foster carers' opinions about the effects of BUSS LEAPlets® on their children's lives.
- Social workers' perspectives about BUSS LEAPlets®, its impacts on children and families and care planning.
- BUSS LEAPlets® facilitators' views about what could be improved to run this programme better.
- Key informants' opinions about BUSS LEAPlets® and its effectiveness for children and families. In research, key informants are usually participants who have high level expertise on a particular topic area. In this study, it is key informants who have very strong knowledge of child welfare and programmes that aim to improve outcomes for children and families.

The purpose of this summary report is to provide the context around the larger full report, summarise some of the main findings and provide a synthesis of the principal conclusions and recommendations of our research.



IFCA: An Overview

The Irish Foster Care Association (IFCA) is a leading organisation in Ireland which supports foster families and improved outcomes for children in care. It was established in 1981 by foster carers and social workers and has a strong focus on learning and development, policy, advocacy and research. Its main aim is to instil excellence in foster care by creating partnerships with foster carers and families, providing learning and support and improving public awareness about foster care in Ireland (IFCA, 2026).

IFCA became interested in BUSS LEAPlets® after some initial conversations were had by the Learning and Development Co-ordinator at IFCA and an Occupational Therapist (OT) about the potential benefits of the BUSS LEAPlets® programme for children in foster care in Ireland. Based on UK-based research, BUSS LEAPlets® has been shown to have many benefits for children in foster care and their families which the IFCA team were keen to harness for children in care in Ireland. This short report details the results of BUSS LEAPlets® on children and foster families' lives as outlined by those who were interviewed as part of this study (i.e. foster carers, social workers, BUSS LEAPlets® facilitators and key informants). Later, we also outline some of the main findings from research in the UK about the impacts of BUSS LEAPlets® on children's lives.

IFCA's work is underpinned by several Irish and international policies that aim to advance better futures for foster children and their families, such as:

- *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) (Children's Rights Alliance (CRA), 2010).
- *Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children: A UN Framework* (SOS Children's Villages International, 2010).
- *National Standards for Foster Care* (Department of Health and Children (DHC), 2003).
- *Strategic Plan for Aftercare Services for Young People and Young Adults 2023–2026* (Tusla, 2023).
- *Strategic Plan for Foster Care Services for Children and Young People 2022–2025* (Tusla, 2022).

You can also find out more about IFCA on their website <https://ifca.ie>



Understanding the Lives of Children in Care

There has been a vast amount of research in Europe, Ireland and internationally on the lives of children in care. The term 'children in care' or 'looked after children' usually includes children who are adopted, in residential care and in foster care. In Ireland, the term 'children in care' is regularly used. However, in the UK, research refers to 'looked after children'.

In Ireland, most children are in long-term foster care (Tusla, 2024, p. 7), and we know from the research that most children go into care because they experience trauma early in life; frequently, abuse and neglect, which affects their relationships with family members, friends, their education and also their abilities to perform routine tasks, like eating, drinking, sitting and standing (Greeson et al, 2011; Maclean et al, 2016). Trauma affects children's lives in many different ways including their emotions and how they express them. It shapes their abilities at school, how they hold a pencil, draw or play games and sports with their friends and how they relate to adults like parents and social workers. Furthermore, we also know that placement breakdowns and frequent placement moves can also affect children's self-esteem, their abilities to make friends and communicate with others, which also impacts negatively on children's development (Tyler, Allison and Winsler, 2006).

Neglect and abuse can take many different forms, but it can include things like restricted access to food, water and/or clean clothing, being left alone for long periods of time, and having untreated medical conditions. Abuse can be sexual, physical or emotional (or indeed, can encompass elements of all three) (Tusla, 2026). These experiences of abuse and neglect often hamper children's abilities to form secure attachments with adults and peers, affecting their self-development, confidence and growth and their physical development too. Children in care often present with language difficulties, developmental delays and mental health issues (O'Higgins, Sebba, and Luke, 2015). This further compounds the multidimensional physical and emotional problems that they face while being in care in how they manage their own bodies and their emotions.

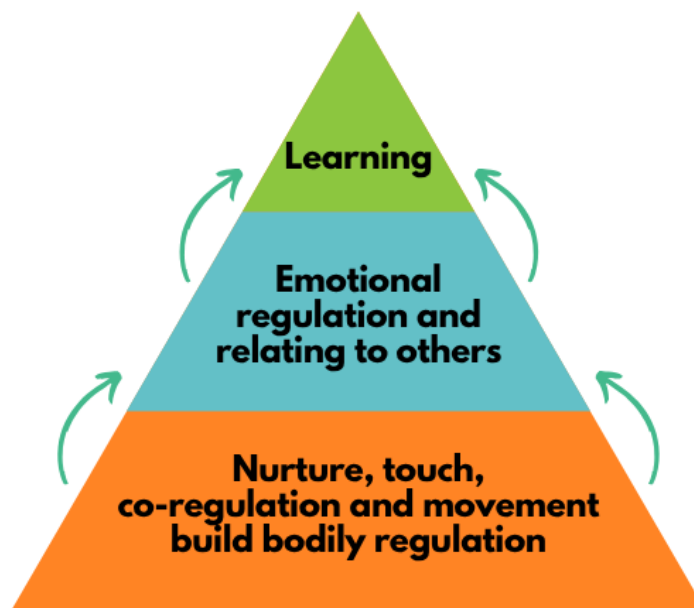


BUSS LEAPlets®: An Overview

BUSS® was initially developed by Sarah Lloyd, an Occupational Therapist (OT) who was working in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in the UK. Inspired by her long career as an OT, the central vision of BUSS® was to improve understanding of the many effects of trauma and developmental delays in children's lives and for BUSS® to become well recognised as an important intervention for children who experienced early neglect and abuse.

Figure 1: Pyramid of Regulation – Foundations for Learning, Emotional Regulation, and Development

(BUSS Model - available at www.bussmodel.org)



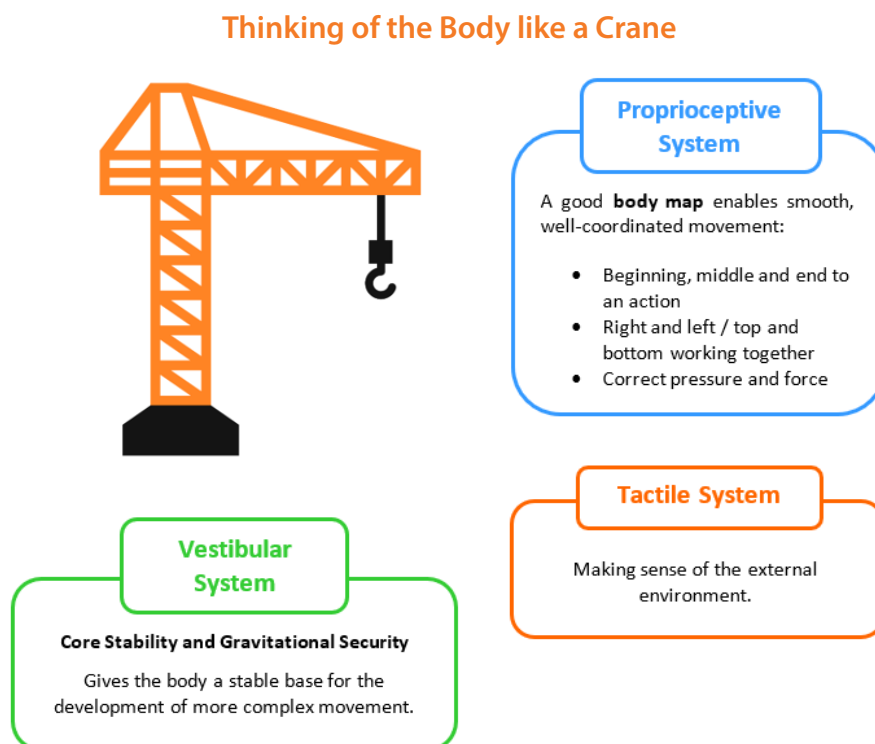
Prior to Sarah Lloyd's work, much research and practice overlooked the sensorimotor development of children who have experienced trauma and developmental delays. This is despite the fact that trauma is well known to have many serious effects on young children's bodies, relationships, emotions, and their ability to learn. Lloyd (2020) describes three key sensorimotor systems that influence a child's development:

- **The vestibular system** supports balance, core strength, and stability. This core strength and gravitational security gives the body a stable foundation for the development of more complex movement. When this system is underdeveloped, children may struggle with coordination and balance control.
- **The proprioceptive system** affects muscle movement and regulation of those movements. It builds on the vestibular system and is about smooth, co-ordinated movements. Children with underdeveloped proprioceptive systems may have limited body awareness and lower levels of coordination.
- **The tactile system** has 2 main functions; making sense of information from outside the body, like sound, taste, touch and smell, as well as the internal environment of the body (knowing when we're too hot, cold, hungry, etc). Children who are exposed to maltreatment may develop weaker tactile systems.

In describing how these 3 key sensorimotor systems influence a child's development, BUSS® uses the crane image to illustrate how these three interconnected sensorimotor systems work together to provide a stable foundation for development:

Figure 2: Overview of Sensory Processing Systems: Vestibular, Proprioceptive, and Tactile

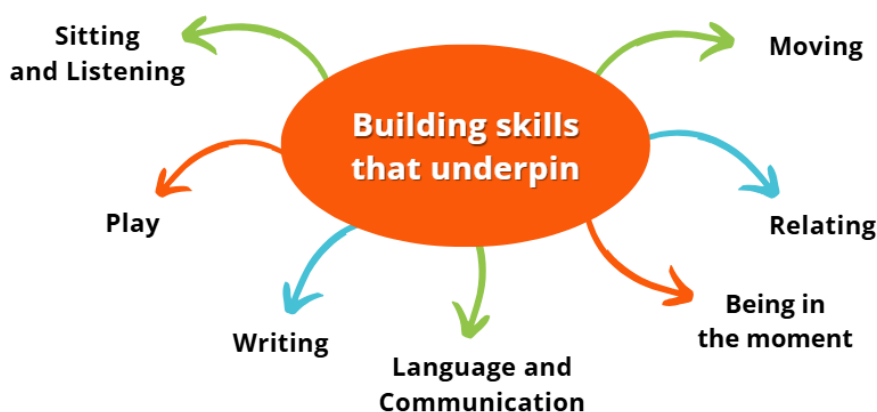
(BUSS Model - available at www.bussmodel.org)



BUSS LEAPlets® is an 11-week structured programme for children aged three to six years and their parents or caregivers. It was developed by Sarah Lloyd to help young children who were having difficulties at school and children who experienced difficulties engaging in and benefitting from, traditional therapeutic interventions like play therapy. The programme supports children who have experienced early developmental challenges, especially problems with attachment and early caregiving which is especially common amongst children in care. Crucially, the programme aims to support skills development that underpins a range of childhood tasks and activities:

Figure 3: Building Foundational Skills for Learning and Development

(BUSS Model - available at www.bussmodel.org)



Some of the main features of BUSS LEAPlets® are the following:

- **Caregiver's agency:** foster carers play prime roles in supporting their children through various play-based activities that are intended to offset developmental delays and repair disruptions to sensorimotor systems affected by early abuse and trauma. BUSS LEAPlets® supports foster carers to understand their child's development level and make sense of gaps in their systems in light of disruption to their development.
- **Bodily regulation:** a child's body being able to 'do' what they are wanting to do without them having to focus on the doing part of the task – e.g. walking and talking. This is part of how children feel in control of their bodies through movement and play.
- **Emotional regulation:** understanding and managing feelings like anger, fear, or sadness.
- **Nurturing relationships:** BUSS LEAPlets® strives to enhance relationships between caregivers and children in a friendly, play-based environment. The emphasis is on supporting carer-child relationships through more attuned understanding of the child and supporting the development of peer group relationships. You can find some links to BUSS LEAPlets® in the reference section of this document.

There is also growing evidence from the UK that BUSS LEAPlets® supports children's development. Some of the main findings include the following:

- In a study of parent's attitudes to BUSS LEAPlets® from West Yorkshire, Smith (2022) found that participating in BUSS LEAPlets® also impacted on foster carers themselves. They found the groups accepting and supportive.
- In the same study, foster carers valued BUSS LEAPlets® because it provided them with a secure space where they could spend valuable time with their child.
- Parents in a study by Robinson (2021) also said that they observed positive changes to their children's cognitive development which they attributed to BUSS LEAPlets®.
- Jones (2021) found positive changes in children's oral motor strength (their abilities to suck, chew and blow) from participating in BUSS LEAPlets®.

So far, there has been little or no research in Ireland on BUSS LEAPlets®. This is one of the reasons why this study is important.



How We Did Our Research

This research is qualitative in that it focuses on people’s perspectives about BUSS LEAPlets® as opposed to statistics or numbers. In 2025, we interviewed 36 people to find out their opinions about BUSS LEAPlets®; the table below contains a summary of the number of interviewees.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Participant Group	Number of Participants
Foster Carers	21
Social Workers	4
Social Care Leaders	2
BUSS LEAPlets® Facilitators	5
Key Informants ¹	4

The larger report contains a summary of the questions we asked foster carers, social workers, BUSS LEAPlets® facilitators and key informants. Some examples of the questions we asked are also listed below:

Table 2. Sample Questions

Has the BUSS LEAPlets® programme been helpful to you?
Can you tell me about your experience of the BUSS LEAPlets® programme?
What activities worked best?
What did you like about the BUSS LEAPlets® programme?
Would you recommend any changes to the BUSS LEAPlets® programme?

All of our interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service as soon as possible after interviews and we also took notes during interviews, which helped us to make sense of people’s opinions. We also found that our own experiences doing interviews previously with children in foster care and foster families helped us enormously.

We analysed all of the interviews using Thematic Analysis (TA) which is a specific type of analysis that is promoted by researchers like Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved reading and re-reading interviews and then extracting themes from them to help us to understand people’s perspectives.

Before any interviews were carried out however, we sought ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) at Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and the Tusla–Child and Family Agency Ethics Committee. Ethical approval is important in every single piece of research. It protects participants and researchers from harm and is based on principles of justice and fairness. We also attended meetings with the BUSS LEAPlets® project steering committee in 2024 which helped us to garner more information about IFCA and the BUSS LEAPlets® pilot. A pilot describes a programme that is running for the first time.



Summary of Main Findings

Generally speaking, foster carers had very positive opinions about BUSS LEAPlets® and its impacts on children's development. Our participants regularly recounted some of the difficulties faced by children who experienced developmental delays as a result of early life traumas:

'He can't put his shoes on; he can't pick his bag up properly; he can't get in the car properly; he can't put on his seat belt properly. Everything is a struggle'.

Foster carers reported that BUSS LEAPlets® had many positive impacts on children who experienced developmental delays through neglect and abuse. Children became more confident in their own bodies which translated into higher self-confidence and greater openness to try new things:

'It was the same every week, the kids knew what was coming, yeah, each was the same, and the kids were getting better and better at the activities because it was repeated, and this improved their confidence, we could all see the improvements as the weeks were going on'.

Foster carers noted that children were more willing to take safe risks, such as climbing, balancing, or navigating play equipment and other positive impacts were reported in children's overall coordination and posture:

'When we, like, we've the playroom now upstairs, and, you know, its gas, like he'll even bring up the games of hiding something and we've to commando crawl to find it, or hide, you know, he really enjoys doing it, you know and even with my [other] foster daughter as well [involved]'.

A key benefit for foster carers was observing improvements in their foster child's ability to manage their emotions. Behaviours that were previously marked by anger and frustration were increasingly replaced with calmer, more controlled responses. These positive effects were more marked when foster carers and children attended sessions regularly and when they practiced what they learned at home:

'I would say we had the tantrums wrapped up to knowing how to deal with them. You know, like [and] 'Why are you getting angry?', and, you know, 'Explain to me why', and stuff like that, then she'd say, 'Oh, I got angry cause... I definitely had got a lot of information on the tantrums, which was what I was going for'.

BUSS LEAPlets® also created positive change for some children in terms of learning and confidence at school which was important. Also significant was the positive impacts for foster carers in terms of social supports and relationships they forged with other attendees:

'And actually, out of it, I managed to make a friend, because her little young fella now is in her school. Yeah. So now the two of us we talk all the time. So that in itself is good. but so many foster carers are isolated and don't get to meet up with other foster carers'.

Some of the areas for improvement highlighted by foster carers included decreasing the number of forms to be completed, reducing group size for more balanced supports and communication about the purpose of particular tasks:

'Or even just post out the forms to them and let them write them. You know, all this online thing, they say it's easier, but it's not easy. It's more of a headache. Or even ask the parents which format they want to do, because some people are quite good with the technology and it wouldn't phase them at all'.

Interviews with social workers echoed the foster carer interviews, corroborating the positive impacts of BUSS LEAPlets® on children's wellbeing and its effects on physical and emotional regulation. These views are important and give a clearer picture of what helps children. Social workers explained that many children in care have had very difficult early experiences, which can affect how they manage their feelings, behaviour and relationships. They saw BUSS LEAPlets® as helpful in building better societal understanding of children's needs. One social worker explained:

'I just think what the BUSS programme is bringing to professionals and to the children and to the foster carers... is just greater understanding of... children's developmental and sensory profiles, and how we can support them more'.

Another described how it improved their confidence in practice, saying:

'I've been able to have better conversations with foster carers... talk to them about... sensory attachment interventions... I wouldn't have realised the significance and the importance'.

This shows that BUSS LEAPlets® helped adults better understand children and respond in more supportive ways. Social workers also spoke about the positive changes they saw in children. They described improvements in how children manage emotions, behaviour and reactions. One shared feedback from a foster carer, saying:

'She can see her regulating and thinking through things more... this child would have trouble recognising emotions... she's finding it really good to help with self-regulation and emotions'.

An important finding of the study was that social workers were supportive of BUSS LEAPlets® being embedded in care planning for children in care and potentially, its role as a universal service that could be offered to all children in Ireland who experienced abuse and neglect. They were clear that the programme works best when it is part of the child's care plan, not something extra. One social worker said:

The BUSS programme is something that should be offered to every child... there should be a flagging... at each care plan... I think it would make a big difference'.

Social workers also highlighted the importance of teamwork and early support, explaining:

'It has to be a coordinated approach... if we're not equipping foster carers... we're going to lose them anyway... it would definitely help... preventing placement breakdowns'.

In simple terms, the findings show that BUSS LEAPlets® can help children, but it needs to be built into everyday practice so that children and carers get the full benefit. The number of social workers in our sample was small however, and follow up research with social workers would be very valuable in this regard.

We interviewed the people who delivered the BUSS LEAPlets® programme and people who know a lot about the BUSS LEAPlets® programme who were also positive about the impacts of the programme on children and foster carers. They described it as *'energising', 'powerful', and 'supportive'*:

'I love the direct work with the children and the foster carers together... each activity happens in the same order... so that they're very familiar to the children'.

BUSS LEAPlets® facilitators were very positive about the quality of the training provided and recounted positive effects on children's bodily and emotional regulation which they observed in their practice:

'The training was excellent. Yeah, the training was excellent... it made absolute sense to me'.

Importantly, BUSS LEAPlets® facilitators also valued the programme's accessible and enjoyable elements. They felt the programme has strong potential but said it would work better in the future with more planning, clearer roles, more time with families, and better funding and follow-up support:

'I think for a pilot it needed to be really, tight but it was really confusing... we needed the same people there... if we have different people coming in and out, the group dynamic changes and it is difficult to manage'.



Summary of Main Conclusions and Recommendations

This study looked at how the BUSS LEAPlets® programme worked for children in foster care in Ireland, based on the views of foster carers, social workers, facilitators and other professionals. Overall, it found that the programme helped children in important ways, especially with how they use their bodies and manage their feelings:

- Children showed improvements in movement, balance, and coordination, which also helped them feel calmer, think more clearly, and build safer relationships.
- Many foster carers said children became more settled during the programme; they were better able to cope with stress, and more willing to join in at home, school, and with friends.
- The programme also helped carers better understand children's behaviour as linked to early trauma, rather than seeing it as 'bad behaviour'. This made it easier to respond early life traumas with care and patience.
- Carers felt more confident and skilled, especially because the sessions were hands-on and supportive, and they valued meeting other carers and sharing experiences.

The study also found that, for the programme to work well long-term if implemented by any organisation in the future, it needs the following:

- Effective supports at all levels of the organisation.
- Buy-in at all levels of the organisation is important.
- Sufficient staff (human capital) and sustainable funding.
- Building BUSS LEAPlets® into children's care plans rather than being seen as an 'add-on' is also important to improving outcomes.

While the results are positive, it is important to note that this was a small study looking at short-term changes, so more research is needed to understand the medium-term and longer-term impacts. Overall, the findings suggest that BUSS LEAPlets® can make a real difference for children and carers when it is well supported and part of everyday care.



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Further Information

For more information on BUSS LEAPlets®, you can also consult the following:

<https://ifca.ie>

<https://bussmodel.org/>

<https://bussmodel.org/early-years-groups/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=080xZAeJxPE>



About the Authors

Dr. Leigh-Ann Sweeney

Dr. Leigh-Ann Sweeney is an Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work and Social Policy at Trinity College Dublin and a CORU-registered social worker. Her professional practice experience spans child and family social work, informing her research and teaching. Dr. Sweeney is committed to service user-led and participatory research approaches that place the voices and lived experiences of families, and communities at the centre of knowledge production. Her research generates evidence to inform social work policy, practice, and systems change, with a particular focus on strengthening supports and improving outcomes for foster carers and children in care in Ireland. Dr. Sweeney's scholarly contributions are published widely in leading international social work and interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journals.

Dr. Lisa Moran

Dr. Lisa Moran is a sociologist specialising in everyday living, qualitative research methods (especially narrative, biographic methods), children in care and higher education. She has worked in HEIs across Ireland and provided consultation to UK universities. She was a senior lecturer in Edge Hill University, Lancashire, England where she taught youth studies, globalisation, the sociology of childhood and equality studies. Lisa has published nationally and internationally and is the former President and Vice President of the Sociological Association of Ireland. She is Dean of Graduate Studies and Head of the Graduate School at the Technological University of the Shannon (TUS).



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