

Parents/Carers and Children's insights from Social Engagement during the Festival of Science and Curiosity (FOSAC) in Nottinghamshire: A Qualitative Report

Background: The Nottinghamshire Festival of Science and Curiosity (FOSAC) is an annual, two-week festival of events and programmes sharing the wonders of Science, Technology, Maths, Engineering, and more across Nottinghamshire (<https://nottsfosac.co.uk/>). Scientists, researchers, engineers, creatives, and inventors go into schools, libraries, and community venues to spark curiosity and inspiration in children, young people, and their families.

Purrble is a socially assistive robot (<https://www.purrble.com/>) designed to help people calm down in-situ, simply by interacting with it. Purrble aims to support users to regulate their emotions in a non-verbal way, at difficult moments. Purrble aims to deescalate immediate distress and help people develop effective emotion regulation practices.

Digital Youth have undertaken research (WP7) investigating whether Purrble can support emotion regulation, mental health, and self-harm in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and other gender identities/sexualities (LGBTQIA+; Lewis & Reynolds, 2021). We aimed to engage with the community to see whether they liked Purrble, if it might be useful or beneficial, and where, when, and who may benefit from Purrble.

Capturing avenues for future research during social engagement sessions is important because participants often highlight gaps, priorities, and ideas that may not surface through formal research and analysis alone.

Objectives: To capture qualitative feedback about Purrble from parents/carers and their children/young people

Methods: We attended two FOSAC sessions:

- Nottingham Central Library (14/02/2026)
- Bulwell Riverside Library (16/02/2026)

Sessions were held between 10:00 and 14:00. People visited us our stand in the library, where we introduced Purrble and described its purpose, and asked people questions about where and why Purrble might be useful. People were informed we were gathering information from them to identify possible future research avenues and uses for Purrble. Data were informally recorded on postcards which people posted in a post-box. Some of these were written by members of the public, and some of them were written by us after discussion with people. A cursory Thematic Analysis was performed to identify overarching themes. All quotes are anonymous and do not contain any

identifiable information. We also captured the ages of children/young people with their adults' permission.

Findings

Overall, we spoke to 106 people (Nottingham N=61; Bulwell N=45). Ages ranged from 1-14-years (M=6.29, SD=2.68) across both sessions. Mean ages by session are in the table below.

Location	Age range	Mean (standard deviation)
Nottingham City Library	1-11-years	5.71 (2.64)
Bulwell Riverside Library	2-14-years	7.12 (2.53)

Themes

Overall, people (adults and children) provided information which covered four key themes:

1. Positive Affective Responses
2. Practical/functional Value
3. Deployment Settings
4. Special notes (these are interesting comments covering various topics)

1. Positive Affective Responses:

	Number of responses
Calming	N=15
Cute	N=14
Funny	N=1
Good/good feelings	N=4
Happy	N=2
Nice	N=1
Soft	N=2
Adorable	N=1
Beautiful	N=1
Not interested	N=1
Strong liking or desire for Purrble	N=24

2. Practical/functional Value:

	Setting	Number of responses
Anxiety	Lessons, schools, hospitals before operations, blood tests, procedures etc,	N=6

	adults/people, social anxiety	
Dementia patients	During sundowning	N=1
Regulate emotions, stressful settings	School, other settings	N=6
Palliative care	Hospitals, hospices	N=1
Therapy sessions		N=1
Autistic children/pupils	Schools, home	N=2
Pet replacement		N=1
Selective mutism	Waiting lists for referrals, in school	N=1
Support children	School transitions, on EHCP, mental health etc waiting lists, timeout areas, quiet area, sensory issues, SEN contexts	N=3

*I included settings here to provide the context given by people.

3. Deployment settings:

	Number of responses
Dementia settings	N=1
Hospitals	N=5
Schools	N=11
Foster settings	N=1
Home	N=1

4. Special notes:

Here are key comments provided by people that illustrate the themes identified above. Those in quotes are people's words, those not in quotes are synthesised by us after discussion with people.

- "Big fan" - Purrble helped child focus in busy FOSAC environment
- "The box is like Paddington. They should do a Paddington Purrble"
- Child determined to calm Purrble down
- "Didn't know a robot could be like this"; "Looks like a bear"; child wants one badly!; "Would call him Bob"
- "Good for parents and children"
- The mental health team has a Purrble
- People pass away in the next bed – Purrble might be useful in hospitals and help children and older people to cope with own and others' distress, the death of a patient nearby. Parents leave and go home, Purrble may help children after parents have left for the day, and help with loneliness
- Secondary school teacher: "high anxiety, low resilience across ages"

- “Think my sister will like it”
- Might be useful as part of a (child’s) bedtime routine
- NTU HCI student: additions = moveable ears, tail, nose to make it more realistic and cuter
- AI may add interactive elements, music, conversation, noises etc (ET & KB)
- Autistic boy wrote two feedback postcards after a lengthy Purrble stroking interaction – Mum said it was the first time he’d written in months
- Child was nervous about attending FOSAC but walked around and felt calmer after stroking Purrble – Mum returned to tell us this.

Synthesis:

Purrble was very popular and both children and adults responded positively to Purrble, and both groups felt Purrble would be useful across various clinical, **academic, and social (i.e., home) settings**. Key settings where Purrble would be useful were **schools and hospitals**. Key functions could include **supporting children (and adults) with anxiety, stress, emotion regulation issues, wider mental health issues and neurodevelopmental disorders, during transitional periods at school, and while on waiting lists for various mental health conditions, or EHCP/SEN support**.

References

Lewis, C., & Reynolds, N. (2021). Considerations for conducting sensitive research with the LGBTQIA+ communities. *International Journal of Market Research*, 63(5), doi: 10.1177/14707853211030488.

Acknowledgments

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