

Supporting Children's Development and Health Internationally

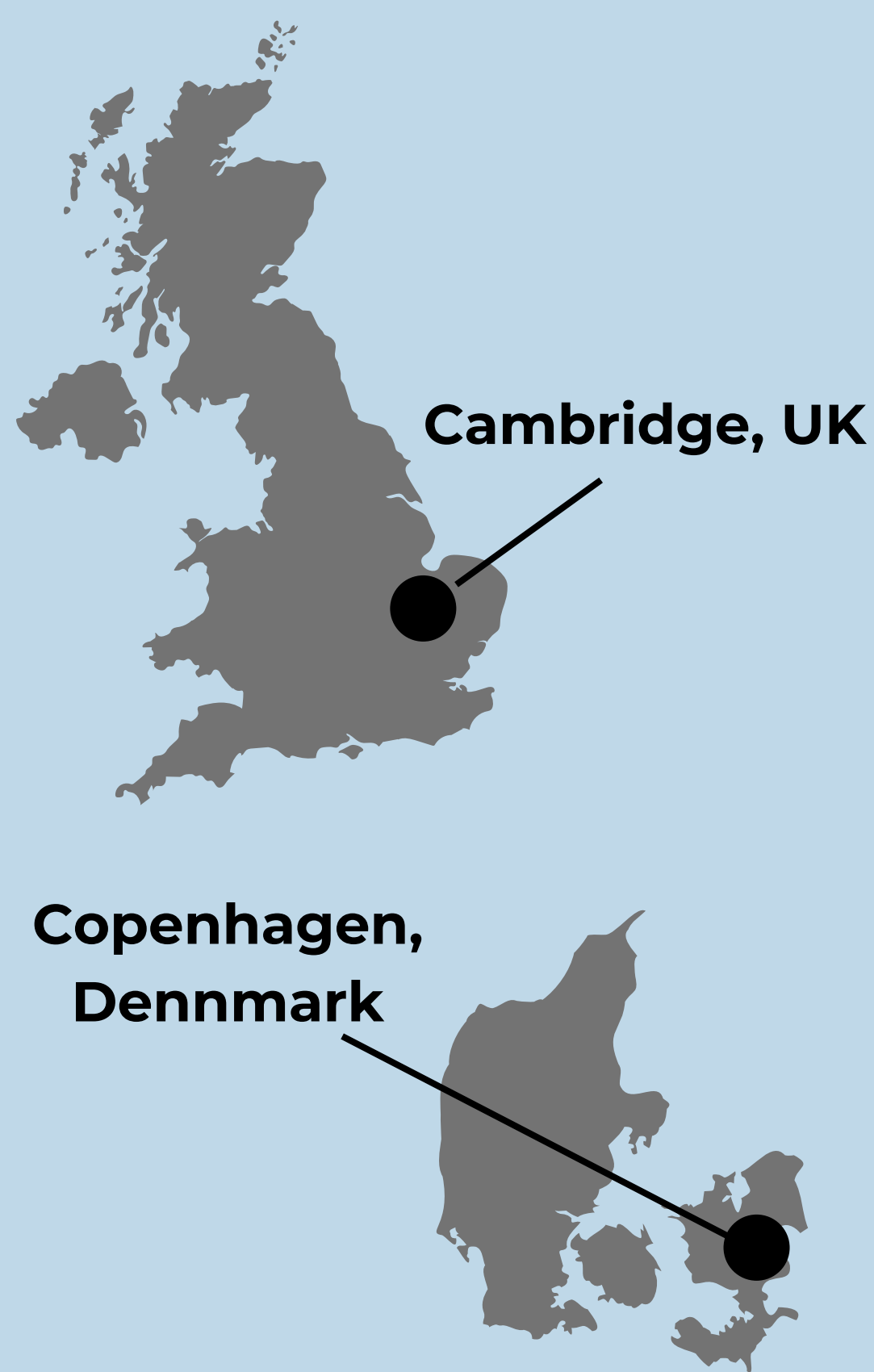


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Through the generous funding of the Burch Fellowship, I explored how play interventions can support children's health. This interest stems from my experience at Carolina studying education and psychology, and from working with Wonder Connection: a non-profit at UNC Children's Hospital that engages children in therapeutic STEM play. Research is beginning to elucidate how play can serve as a communicative tool and enact a sense of purpose for children, especially those enduring adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

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The University of Cambridge leads world in play research at the PEDAL Centre lab, where I worked as a research intern for the summer. I also conducted independent research explorations of play spaces in the UK and Denmark, connecting with non-profit leaders, policy experts, researchers, and educators focused on supporting children through play.

At Cambridge, I worked under Dr.



Christine O'Farrelly and Dr. Paul Ramuchurri, two of the leading researchers on children's play globally. I collaborated on multiple projects and collected data. With Dr. Paulina Pérez-Duarte Mendiola, I assisted with her PhD work investigating pediatric patients' perspectives on their experience with the Health Play Specialist team at Addenbrookes Hospital. It was interesting to recognize the impact and pride associated with the NHS for British society.

I engaged with Sydney Conroy's PhD work on trauma-response play through children's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, where they shared their reactions through sand play. Utilizing her play therapist background, Sydney is learning more about the fears that lingered from the pandemic and how that influences children's social and emotional development now, allowing for future interventions to be most effective and designed accordingly. I helped Sydney design the experiment space and procedures, even serving as a trial 'participant' charting my own pandemic experience in the sand tray to work out all aspects of the methodology prior to data collection with the child participant population.

In 1989, the United Nations officially declared children's right to play: a fundamental human right for all children. At Cambridge, I worked with Sally Hogg, the leading policy fellow at the PEDAL Centre, on her



paper for the Scottish Children's Commission, providing empirical justification for why play is necessary for the coping of asylum-seeking children. Although 'play' is far-too-often dismissed as frivolous, research is demonstrating it is absolutely necessary, especially for children enduring extreme adversity. Thus, an impactful component of my Burch Fellowship was learning more about the policy side to play: how to advocate for play as a child's right, as essential to their well-being and normative development. Ultimately play combats childhood psychopathology associated with ACEs and provides children a pivotal right: a space to express themselves in a sometimes harsh, unjust world.

In connecting with Jan Kampmann at Roskilde University, I learned about early childcare programming, provided free to every Danish child aged 1-6. Jan explained how increased adherence to the national learning standards in Denmark has decreased the opportunities and support for children to engage in free, spontaneous, and social play. They are therefore working on mandating children's play rights from a policy perspective.



In Copenhagen, I toured some of the 125 open, public playgrounds, inspired by the society's embrace and prioritization of children's engagement outdoors. Perhaps my favorite exploration was touring a Danish børnehave (kindergarten) where children are taught compassion for one another and for the natural world, with an emphasis on experiential learning through

many local field trips - transporting children on an electric bike! This enables environmentally sustainable travel and explorations to expand the children's perspectives, creativity, and overall learning. At the børnehave, space is plentiful, and children take turns caring for the chickens, harvesting eggs, and eating them as a community.

The school educates children as prosocial citizens and focuses on peace and kindness as tools for social progress. Even in the more urban areas of London, playgrounds were prevalent compared to similarly urban communities in the United States. Outdoor green spaces were made accessible for children and incorporated into their formal and informal learning.



After learning more about why play is so important for children's mental and physical well-being, collecting empirical evidence, identifying where play interventions have proved effective, and identifying free play as a therapeutic outlet for children, I am inspired to pursue this work at a broader scale.

Through my studies culminating in spring 2024, my intensive coursework and volunteer experiences have prepared me to pursue postgraduate studies in play as a source of empowerment for at-risk children. I hope to return to Copenhagen this summer to work in international outreach and research and then to enroll in a graduate program to earn a PhD analyzing play as a source of stress resilience and a catalyst for STEM self-efficacy, lasting long beyond formative childhood years.

Thank you so much to the Burch Fellowship, Honors Carolina, the Burch Family, Aspen Yordy, Kristen Papoi, Gina Difino, and the University of Cambridge PEDAL Centre for this incredible experience and opportunity.