

RHYMES Reimagined

...is a research and development project that Rosie Adediran (singer, early years music leader) undertook in 2019, to:

- 1** **paint a picture** of 'music' and 'singing' activity in a variety of free, accessible settings across England that support families with under 3's
- 2** **assess the need** for more support for the volunteers and staff leading music activity
- 3** establish **what exactly is needed** to improve the skills, confidence and effectiveness of delivery by practitioners or volunteers

I have a particular interest in music and singing habits of **families and under 3's**, and the settings such as libraries, children's centres and informal playgroups / drop-ins that are often parent's first port of call in the early months and years of parenthood, that offer free services, advice and activities.

The research was comprised of:

- **A survey**, distributed to practitioners and volunteers working in libraries, children's centres and playgroups. We had 342 responses
- Visits to 12 varied settings to **observe** their music activity with families
- **Interviews** with practitioners in these settings, and more informal interviews with parent attendees
- **A case-study** visit to the Scottish Booktrust to examine the 'Bookbug' music programme, looking at their training scheme and resources as well as undertaking session observations and interviews with staff, leaders and parents
- **A focus group** with a group of 15 practitioners and volunteers from a variety of settings

What I learnt:

1. Painting a picture of music-activity:

Music-making activity is taking place with families all over the country in a variety of settings, and is being delivered by staff and volunteers that have generally not received any recent musical training or support.

- **93%** of survey respondents stated that they **run regular music activity with the families that attend their setting**, with 77% using music in every single session
- *Informal toddler groups play a big part in provision for families: there was a strong response from these kinds of parent-led or church-based groups (over 40% of total survey responses) especially outside of London, for which volunteers play a big part*
- 87% of settings were leading music activity themselves, or from within their own team compared with 2.8% who outsourced their music programme to an outside music specialist
- 78% of respondents had received no training or support in their music delivery over the past two years

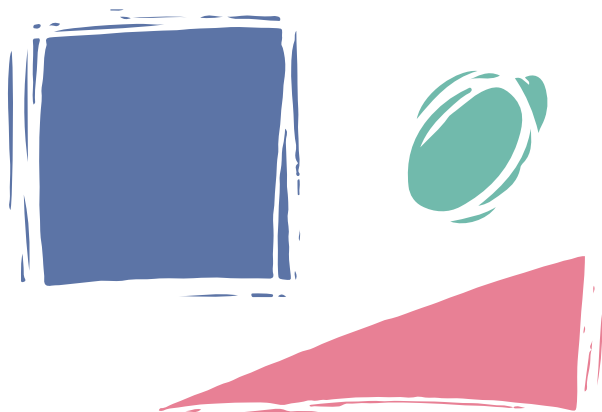
2. Assessing the need

- Enjoyment of leading music activity for practitioners was closely linked to perceived skill, and confidence. Practitioners who believed they were skilled, also reported high confidence and enjoyment. Conversely, those who reported low skill levels, also scored low for confidence and enjoyment.
- There is a great deal of understanding from practitioners and volunteers around the wide-ranging benefits of the activity for both parents and their children. For infants, the most cited benefits were related to **speech and language development** and for parents and families, the most cited benefits were related to **bonding and attachment-building**.
- However, delivering music activity with families presents many **challenges** for practitioners.

One of the major challenges across the board was **engaging parents**. Parents chatting through sessions and not engaging with their children accounted for more than 29% of answers.

- Challenges relating to **staffing** was the other major theme at 31% of answers, with themes of: staff lacking confidence, ideas and low perceived musical skill, a lack of willing or available staff members or volunteers, and a lack of staff training.
- **Libraries** are playing an increasing role in the provision of music, with 'rhyme time' sessions (or similar) offered free of charge and often without number restrictions in a large proportion of libraries. However, the 'rhyme time' concept has become largely unregulated and quality of provision is patchy, with librarians often being expected to lead huge, noisy sessions of adults and under 5's with very little or no training.
- Practitioners and volunteers that lead music activity with little or no training, are finding ideas and inspiration on the internet. Survey respondents cited 'online' and 'YouTube' as the main resource at 34% of total responses. Just 6.6% said they used printed/recorded materials including books, CD's or magazines. Leaders are creating their own system for music delivery in their settings – I saw this done successfully in my observations, in both of the children's centres I visited but less successfully in two of the library observations.

There is a lack of a cohesive framework or guidance for practitioners and volunteers in England and a sense therefore that the work is not supported or valued. Observing the impact, influence and consistent messaging of the Scottish Bookbug programme highlighted this contrast.



3. What is needed to improve skills and confidence of leaders?

- The survey offered practitioners ideas for what might be useful to them in the future. **'More ideas for music making' came out on top at nearly 22%, followed by 'a song bank' at 20% of answers.** 'Mentoring' was the least popular option at just 5.5% of answers.
- My interviews and the Focus group highlighted the absolute lack of support felt by practitioners from a range of settings in their delivery of musical activity, both at a managerial and policy / funding level. A network or an organisation that tackles the lack of clear messaging around music making with families could be a lifeline for practitioners, which alongside offering practical training and resources, advocates and promotes the activity as a vital part of parenting young children.
- Any training offer must take into account the fact that many of the identified skills, behaviours and knowledge needed for this kind of challenging work (as identified by the focus group) are in fact non-musical. Music specialists must acknowledge this and engage in a two-way transfer of skills when designing any practical tool for leaders.

In summary:

There is a clear and present need for a training and resource tool for practitioners that is accessible, flexible and user friendly, highlighted through the Focus Group. Crucially, the creation or adaption of music leadership resources must be designed around the skills and confidence levels of practitioners, be accessible, free of charge, user-friendly, dynamic, and meet practitioners where they are.

Further R&D is now needed to establish the nature of this tool, and to work together with practitioners to build, test and deliver.



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