

# MUSIC MAKES YOUTH

## Engaging 'Hard-to-Reach' Parents in Early Years Music-making

### *Executive Summary*

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Dr. Jayne Osgood  
Dr. Deb Albon  
Dr. Kim Allen  
Sumi Hollingworth



## Executive Summary

In 2010 Youth Music commissioned the Institute for Policy Studies in Education (at London Metropolitan University) to undertake a study aimed to identify effective approaches to engaging 'hard to reach' families in early years music-making.

## Research Objectives

The research had the following objectives:

1. to identify models of effective engagement in early years music-making with 'hard to reach' parents;
2. to establish what components of parent-child early years music-making could most effectively be replicated/disseminated and in which contexts to encourage greater participation; and
3. to track the implementation of these components and assess which are most successful at engaging 'hard to reach' parents in music-making.

## Methods

In order to meet these objectives the research had three main strands of enquiry:

- **Strand One:** a comprehensive review of literature;
- **Strand Two:** an investigation into effective practices in engaging 'hard to reach' parents; and
- **Strand Three:** action research to track the implementation of identified engagement strategies and to assess their effectiveness.

### Strand One

Firstly, an extensive review of the literature provided insights into the barriers to parental engagement in early years music-making. Published academic and grey literature on music-making with 'hard to reach' parents, including

Youth Music research and evaluation was drawn upon. Good practice was identified by drawing on literature and evidence of strategies used to reach parents in other types of non-music based programmes.

### Strand Two: Scoping Exercise & In-depth Case Studies

An essential aspect of this research was to gain an understanding of the current nature of parental engagement in early years music-making projects, levels of parental engagement and participation, challenges encountered by practitioners in engaging particular groups of parents; and effective strategies used to enhance the engagement of 'hard to reach' groups within early years music-making. A scoping exercise of current and recently completed early years music-making projects achieved a broad coverage of the views and experiences of leaders, and added to the robustness of the evaluation by gathering information about other neighbouring services designed to engage families deemed 'hard-to-reach'.

Leaders of eleven Youth Music funded projects located across the regional areas identified by Youth Music were interviewed. The interviews assisted with the identification of interesting and/or good practice, as well as projects that are encountering challenges with particular groups, and informed the sampling of projects for the next stage of the study. In addition to the interviews with YM music leaders information about other related/parallel (non-Youth Music funded) services in the area and general approaches taken to engaging 'hard-to-reach' families (in the form of published/publically available material and through additional telephone interviews) was collected. Telephone interviews with Children's Centre managers or Local Authority Music Advisors provided strategic information about the range of provision available to families in the local area.

Materials and information about a range of services in a given area were systematically collected with the aim of mapping/scoping the strategies taken to better engage parents. Extensive internet searches helped to build a more comprehensive picture of the activities/approaches taken in the chosen areas. Demographic data available via Local Authorities were included to ensure that the regions chosen offered diversity (so that various aspects of 'hard-to-reachness' were included in subsequent strands of the study).

### Case studies of parental engagement strategies in four areas

To complement the scoping exercise and gain a more in-depth understanding of parental engagement in early years music-making case studies was undertaken. They primarily focused on Youth Music funded projects in four different areas in England. Some included Children's Centres, but the range of early years music-making practices in these areas within (and outside formal, statutory provision) was included.

The literature review and the scoping exercise were used to select a sample of case study areas. The case studies provided evidence about the full range of early years music-making interventions and challenges to engaging parents. The scoping exercise and literature review allowed for the selection of areas that used successful or interesting interventions to engage 'hard to reach' parents as well as those which have experienced particular challenges. As parental groups that are 'hard to reach' vary from area to area, informed by the specific socio-economic, cultural and ethnic composition of particular localities, the sample included a range of urban, suburban and rural locations; and areas with different socio-economic and ethnic profiles.

Interviews were conducted with music leaders, strategic staff, stakeholders and parents; and observations of early years music-making

practices were undertaken in each case study area. Contextual data were also collected to provide richer insights into the case study areas, for example demographic data on the socio-economic and ethnic profiles of parents and children.

### Strand Three: Action Research

The final strand of research involved IPSE supporting a small number of Youth Music funded music-making projects to:

- reflect upon the approaches they currently adopt in engaging 'hard to reach' families;
- systematically assess the impact of altering their approaches to engaging 'hard to reach' families; and
- disseminate the findings from the action research exercise to other music-making projects.

Three, Youth Music funded, early years music-making projects were identified to participate. The projects were provided with an action research 'toolkit' to guide and enable effective assessment of approaches taken to engaging and supporting 'hard to reach' families. Since action research is intended to be iterative the projects were required to conduct an initial phase of self-evaluation to establish what practices and strategies they currently adopt in attempting to attract and engage 'hard to reach' families. Following this initial reconnaissance phase the projects were in a position to consider ways in which they might adjust their approach with 'hard to reach' families. Changes in approach and delivery were informed by the research-evidence generated in Strands One and Two of the research. By supporting projects to more systematically reflect on their approaches, important learning occurred within the projects.

### Findings

The study began by drawing on the literature to

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### Findings

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(re)consider the concept 'hard-to-reach' and allow for a shift in focus towards policy, organizational planning and service delivery rather than seeing 'problems' as residing in individuals or groups. The literature located early years music-making within wider parenting, child development and educational outcomes agendas. Therefore it is important to trouble the underlying motivations that various actors hold when wanting to engage parents in music-making. A series of probing questions were identified that might help to establish possible motives behind attempts to engage all parents:

- Why engage parents?
- Should 'hard to reach' parents become engaged in early-years music-making because they are 'deficient' and music-making represents a means of improving parenting/family life?
- Should diverse families become engaged in music-making simply because it is personally fulfilling?
- Is there a reciprocal agenda?
- Can music and music-making be enriched by a wider range of people becoming involved?

The answers to these questions are complex but create opportunities for organisations to reflect upon the policies informing their practices, and to understand practices that play out in local contexts.

### Effective Practices

Following attempts to trouble the concept 'hard to reach' a review of the literature highlighted a range of strategies and approaches that might assist EYMM providers ensure provision is more appealing to the widest range of families. The literature indicates a need for services to be attuned to the families that make up the local communities in which they are located, and further to resist making assumptions about groups and individuals and their perceived

'needs'. As Boag Munroe and Evangelou (2010) stress, services need to "build relationships of trust with families and with each other". Such trust-building requires time and resources to ensure continuity of staff and provision.

Several overarching themes emerged from the literature about what works to engage parents; firstly, a focus on longer rather than short term interventions. Secondly, working holistically with sound inter-agency practices to support families is essential. Providing flexible and innovative delivery and considering how delivery models may exclude invisible or often overlooked groups of parents is an important issue. Boag Munroe and Evangelou (2010) state that the following key skills: communication, flexibility, adaptability, contextualised and community-based work, careful design of appropriate settings, and relationship building, should be developed in order that services can better reach and engage 'hard to reach' families.

Further to this, developing genuinely culturally inclusive provision is central to effectively addressing 'hard-to-reach-ness'. This is specifically relevant to excluded minority ethnic; religious, and linguistic groups but is also relevant to working-class groups who may feel excluded from provision, and indeed those with disabilities (physical, sensory or learning) who face wider discrimination or find services are inimical to their needs. Effectively engaging parents starts with raising awareness and interest but relies on working collaboratively with them, to deliver something parents and families want and value.

### Scoping Exercise

The scoping exercise revealed a set of overarching themes about the approaches taken to define and engage families deemed in some way 'hard to reach' in early years music-making. In general, approaches to assessing and monitoring the profile of families engaged in EYMM were inconsistent; projects appeared to

keep only partial information about attendance, retention and so on. Information about 'hard to reach' families in the context of EYMM was scant and hence discussions about strategies to reach and engage them were based upon impressionistic hunches and negative stereotypes about parenting/family life of particular groups.

The principles of interagency working outlined above (communication, flexibility, adaptability, contextualised and community-based work, careful design of appropriate settings, and relationship building) were identified as the best means to support 'hard to reach' families. However, policy shifts and funding restrictions meant that such practices were threatened and demands for more 'targeting' had significant implications for the approaches taken at local level.

The organisation and delivery of EYMM raised an important set of tensions in terms of interagency and partnership working. Children's Centres have an overt commitment to engaging specific groups and constructed EYMM as an important means of attracting families. This view of EYMM was not necessarily shared by music providers, particularly when music became constructed primarily as a 'hook' to other services, rather than appreciation of musicality for its own sake. Another key tension related to professionals feeling their respective expertise was devalued. Music specialists had little experience of working with very young children and some early years practitioners were viewed as lacking musical confidence. Respective expertise and pedagogical approaches were rarely negotiated, instead professional hierarchies emerged that placed music providers as superior to early years practitioners- which has important implications for the nature, content and delivery of EYMM.

Rationales for engaging families in early years music-making included the likely therapeutic

benefits; developmental gains; school-readiness; and improved parental confidence. The ways in which the various rationales were presented implicitly reinforced deficit assumptions about children within 'hard to reach' families – as in greater need of the benefits that EYMM can offer.

### **Case Study Observations & Interviews**

The in-depth qualitative research in EYMM projects in four case study areas highlighted a range of important factors that facilitate or hinder the engagement of 'hard to reach' families in EYMM. First was the important interrelationship between where a music session is located, the reputation it builds over time, and how this becomes valuable knowledge that can be fostered amongst a captive audience (i.e. those attending multiple services in one venue) or readily taken up by those seeking good quality services at little or no cost. Following this, locating EYMM in 'neutral territory' was central to attracting the widest range of families. Unlike Children's Centres, libraries and other 'community venues' were symbolically distanced from policy requirements to target, engage, monitor and regulate particular families.

A key factor to improve the chances of engagement in family services (including EYMM) is proactive and strategic outreach work. Families tend to be most receptive to invitations, referrals and encouragement from their peers (parent volunteers) rather than professionals.

Practical factors such as timing and scheduling were also vitally important. EYMM sessions become a routine part of 'mental diaries' that busy parents keep i.e. music group 10.30 at the library Mons & Weds; Swimming 2pm Tuesday; Rhyme Time 3pm Friday etc.

There was an identifiable disjuncture between those funding/facilitating provision and those delivering EYMM sessions. This is a recurring issue presented throughout the report about the

Children Centre agenda which constructs music as a 'hook' to reach families versus music specialists concerns for mastery, cultural enhancement and appreciation of the benefits of musicality. These competing agendas have important implications for how families view EYMM sessions and there is a need for improved synergy between family services and music specialists.

The targeted/universal provision debate was a central issue which has important repercussions for attendance at EYMM. Where attendance has a scent of coercion or compulsion levels of commitment to regular attendance and active participation can become adversely affected. Having been referred to EYMM families are implicitly identified as having 'a need' which can unwittingly stigmatise them and ultimately act as a deterrent to EYMM. This directly relates to questions presented above about the underlying motivations and agendas for wanting families to engage in EYMM.

Providers employ a range of strategies to make parents aware of EYMM, connect it to other family services, ensure universal (or targeted) access is variously negotiated which inevitably results in different outcomes and patterns of provision. It is for any given EYMM project to determine the principle objective (music education, social inclusion etc), the arrangements in place to engage and accommodate local families, and ultimately to recognise that reaching 'hard-to-reach' families will have implications for the nature of the EYMM delivered.

EYMM projects tend to (often unintentionally and despite best efforts) privilege normative (white, British, middle-class, heterosexual) practices through the choice of songs, unwritten behaviour codes and the judgements made of performances that sit outside ideas of normative parenting. Music leaders are likely to achieve engagement/participation when sessions are

warm, respectful, and when the music leader is a recognisable member of the local community. However, where music leaders are 'parachuted in' they lack this connection. Furthermore, music leaders tend to be white, middle-class and often classically trained musicians for which the cultural connotations can be off putting.

EYMM sessions tend to be rigidly structured and highly regulated spaces with unwritten scripts, and implicit expectations for punctuality, active participation and adherence to unspoken rules. Where families appear to breach these conditions in some respect they become 'read' as less engaged. This interpretation is dependent upon preconceived notions and interpretations of particular (classed, cultural) behaviours. Through critical reflection and by troubling 'taken-for-granted' assumptions about EYMM and the engagement of families it is possible to interpret scenarios and behaviours differently and adjust provision accordingly and so avoid judging groups of parents against a middle-class norm.

Insufficient opportunities are made available to consult families about their preferences for EYMM. Professionals relied on intuition and professional wisdom (in some cases to great effect) but where 'hard to reach' families were persistently not engaged in EYMM there was little attempt to systematically ascertain the reasons for this.

The findings indicate that meaningful engagement evolves over time and is facilitated by the incorporation of sociable features (such as 'chat' times, refreshment breaks etc) within projects. The significance of supporting community relationships (and indeed the potential for EYMM projects to represent a 'micro-community') was stressed throughout the case study observations. However, there appears to be a staunch resistance to the creation of artificial communities, where families feel coerced or compelled to participate.

Those involved in EYMM have an awareness of the need to form relationships, provide scaffolding and so on yet complexities remain from the symbolic representations of music(ians) and the ways in which judgements about ('hard to reach') families are based upon (often unfounded) assumptions.

### **Hearing from 'Hard to Reach' Families**

Hard to reach' families employ a range of strategies to engage children in music-making or music related pursuits. Despite generally relaxed stances music featured significantly in the family life of all those interviewed. Music held important symbolic socio-cultural significance. Engaging with music was thought to contribute to the formation of particular identities, and to opportunities that might become available from finding an affinity with music (from life skills to self-discipline to social mobility).

For 'hard to reach' families the presence of music, and engagement with it, was routine and habitual rather than a discrete activity requiring dedicated practice. For working-class families music was inherently embedded in the daily practices of domestic life. Where music was an everyday practice and a regular feature of home life, children readily engaged with it; and hence engaged with their parents. It was not a planned, structured learning activity, but inconspicuous cultural learning-through-doing.

The construction of working-class parents leading 'chaotic' lives and middle-class mothers as 'shrewd and meticulously organised' was challenged. All parents recounted the inevitable chaos that comes with having young children; this was further compounded when families expand. Therefore attending formal early years sessions (music-making or otherwise) was a challenge they preferred not to negotiate.

This group of parents was deterred from attending EYMM because it is often too

structured and incompatible with the competing demands on their time. The type of provision of greatest appeal to this group of parents tended to be flexible and informal.

Cost was as an important consideration and a particular barrier for those unemployed or on low-incomes. Related to cost was doubt over the quality of EYMM sessions. From prior experience, concerns were raised that music leaders lacked singing ability; over relied on traditional nursery rhymes; and provided insufficient instruments. Music leaders were expected to be competent, engaging and organised but also to have some appreciation and experience of working with very young children (the latter was found lacking).

The working-class mothers advocated popular music to teach young children about society. Cultural learning through popular music does not preclude opportunities to acquire cognitive development associated with more traditional genres (repetition, word/letter recognition, etc). For these families popular music was not regarded as a replacement to traditional pre-school music; it was viewed as complimentary.

Policy imperatives to reach and engage these sorts of families rest upon assumptions that there is a need to stimulate them through formal music-making, however there was a general view that provision was not stimulating enough. This finding raises important questions about the symbolic cultural representations (and perceived superiority) of some forms of musical engagement (EYMM) over others (that which occurs habitually within the domestic sphere).

Findings from 'hard to reach' parents further supports claims made in the literature and in previous chapters, that formal EYMM can represent judgemental, White, middle-class, heterosexual, normative spaces.

Non- or sporadic attendance at EYMM does not necessarily denote social exclusion or



marginalisation. The musical activities of 'hard to reach' families are invisible in policy terms yet parents are often engaged with their children in music-making at home, with friends and outside formal EYMM settings.

### **Action Research**

The Action Research strand of the study remains a work in progress since the three participating projects are involved in on-going revisions to their practice with families deemed 'hard to reach' in the local context. However, the preliminary findings appear to indicate that the paying attention to the issues highlighted above can make an important difference to the nature and level of engagement of specific groups of parents.

The close critical reflection that the Action Research EYMM projects undertook reinforced the findings that engaging families deemed 'hard to reach' is both challenging and time consuming. Establishing and sustaining relationships is key to more effective practice but means of achieving it rests on strategic planning and attention to detail in the minutiae of EYMM sessions. For example, the ways in which parents are addressed is vitally important and so too is the use of technology. Making use of interactive whiteboards and the production of a book and video were some of the strategies employed to ensure that parents can review a project, celebrate achievement, and discuss the value of EYMM for their children's learning.