

YOUTH MAKES

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National Foundation for Youth Music:
Action Research Toolkit:
Engaging Families in Early Years Music-making



Youth Music: Action Research Toolkit: Engaging Families in Early Years Music-making

What do we mean by an 'action research toolkit'?

- This particular toolkit has been developed in order to support practitioners who work in early years' music-making with an aim of engaging families. For some of you, this may be with engaging a particular group e.g. traveller families or fathers.
- The emphasis is on engaging with families deemed 'hard to reach' to ensure early years' music-making practice is as inclusive as possible.
- We use the word 'toolkit' because this leaflet is based on what we have found out about engaging families in early years' music-making (EYMM) from an extensive review of the literature on the subject; a scoping exercise of EYMM projects across the country; talking to key individuals with expertise in delivering services for families; and case studies of four EYMM projects.
- It is called a 'toolkit' because it is likely that some 'tools' will be more useful in helping you to engage with families in your project – or at different stages of your project - than others. You have greatest knowledge of the families you are trying to engage in your particular projects and areas.
- These 'tools' relate to reflective questions to ask of EYMM practice (contained in the coloured boxes later on) as well as the research methods which might be employed at various points in an action research project. In this toolkit we provide a basic overview of research methods which might be employed but also give details of references where you can find more detail.
- It is hoped that by participating in an action research project aimed at engaging families in EYMM you will be further enhancing collective understandings of how to develop this important area of practice.

What do we mean by 'action research'?

- This toolkit is based on ideas about the importance of action research (sometimes called 'practitioner research') as a means through which practitioners themselves work on enhancing their practice in a particular area.
- Action research often emerges from real-life, practical problems. Elliott (1991:52) describes this as 'practical wisdom', which he defines as 'the capacity to discern the right course of action when confronted with particular, complex and problematic states of affairs'. Here, the issue is how EYMM projects can engage with families in order to make their service as inclusive as possible.
- More critically, Brown and Jones (2001) argue that action research enables practitioners to problematize areas of their practice that have seemed 'common-sense'. When thinking about engaging families in EYMM this is a vital consideration as it is often these taken-for-granted ideas about particular groups of families and established ways of working that need challenging.

- A key idea in action research is the idea that people work collaboratively on enhancing practice as opposed to working in isolation. Crucially, for something to be sustainable, more than one person needs to have ownership of the ideas and be involved in changing practice.
- Action research can be thought of as a cycle in which you start by 1) identifying a particular issue (for the purposes of this project, this will relate to enhancing the engagement of a particular group of families in some way); 2) then develop a more rigorous understanding of the initial issue (through research); 3) then plan to make changes; 4) then monitor these changes; and finally, 5) evaluating the impact of changes made. This cycle may well develop into further cycles (Kemmis and Taggart [2005] suggest 'spirals') as new ideas for enhancing practice are likely to come to mind and these too may be implemented; monitored; and evaluated. You can see a very simple pictorial representation of an action research cycle below (taken from LLAS.ac.uk):



An action research cycle

- For those of you that are new to action research, this might sound like what you do anyway – after all, most practitioners are keen to improve their practice! – but action research involves a more rigorous approach to e.g. developing an understanding of the particular issue (why a particular group of families are not engaging with a particular EYMM project) as well as a more rigorous approach to monitoring and evaluating changes made to practice. In addition, unlike everyday practice, action research is often disseminated to a wider audience and we hope that in the course of your action research projects you share your findings and experiences with others.

We include chapter 8 on action research from the book 'Research Methods in Early Childhood' by Mukherji and Albon for further reading.

What we have found out about engaging families with young children in music-making?

We have found that there are a number of factors that impact on the engagement (or not) of families in EYMM. These include:

- ✓ The advertising and marketing of projects and sessions
- ✓ Time and place of sessions
- ✓ Whether sessions are universal i.e. for everybody or targeted at a particular group e.g. young parents
- ✓ Monitoring who engages in EYMM
- ✓ Working closely with other services
- ✓ The content of EYMM projects and sessions
- ✓ How EYMM projects and sessions are delivered
- ✓ The importance of establishing and sustaining relationships

These are explored in more detail in the boxes below and with reference to work from the literature and data gained from this Youth Music funded research project so far.

The advertising and marketing of projects and sessions

- How do families get to hear about your EYMM project?
- Do you involve a range of key professionals and agencies e.g. health visitors and nursery staff in a children's centre in publicising your project?
- Is there a key individual you can identify, who 'makes things happen' – this may be someone who is prominent in the local community (and not a 'professional')?
- Do you place any publicity materials e.g. posters and leaflets in spaces which are used by families with whom you find difficult to engage e.g. community cafes; football clubs; places of worship?
- Are any written materials you produce available in languages other than English? How do parents who cannot read find out about your project?
- How 'user-friendly' are your publicity materials? Are they inviting to the particular families you are hoping to attract? Have you elicited their views on any publicity materials and made any changes on the basis of this?
- Do you make use of technologies often enjoyed by the families with whom you hope to engage e.g. Facebook or text-messaging to advertise your sessions?

Time and place of sessions

- Do your sessions run at a time which is convenient for your intended families e.g. after dropping children off at school/nursery or prior to this or especially if in a rural area, at times which dovetail with any local bus services?
- If your service is over-subscribed, how do you ensure that families (who for a range of reasons find it difficult to get to sessions at a particular time) are still able to access your sessions e.g. through keeping back a few places for late-comers?
- If you run sessions at different times, which families tend to attend particular sessions? What can you learn from this?
- Where do EYMM sessions take place? Is the venue comfortable and accessible for all families? Have you elicited the views of families on the timing and venue of your project?

Universal or targeted sessions?

- If you offer targeted sessions to particular groups of families, how is this presented to them?
- If your project has a brief to target a particular group of families, how was this 'target group' decided upon? What assumptions are made about particular groups of families in this process?
- How are the particular families you hope to engage with identified (if your service is targeted)? How do you avoid stigmatizing them as a group?
- If you offer sessions which are open to everyone, are there particular groups of families that do not attend your EYMM sessions? Who? (see further points)

Monitoring who engages in EYMM

- Is data kept relating to who attends EYMM sessions (i.e. demographic details around age; class; 'race'; distance travelled; whether the parent/child has additional needs etc...) and the regularity with which families engage with a project?
- What methods are used in order to gain this data? How do families feel about this?
- Is this data analysed e.g. to see which families in a given area engage in EYMM sessions? (This might involve checking against demographic data in a given area and working closely with key services such as children's centres)
- How is this data used i.e. is it used to feed forward to developing new strategies for engaging with families? Do you inform families of the purpose of collecting such data?

Working closely with other professionals and other services

- To what extent and in what ways does your project liaise with other services in the locality, most notably early years' services such as children's centres?
- To what extent are you aware of the priorities of different services with whom you work and how your project fits into these priorities?
- To what extent do you share ideas with early years' practitioners e.g. ideas about how to enhance EYMM in early years' settings?
- How do you value the knowledge and expertise of early years' practitioners e.g. in their work with particular families and/or their expertise in working with very young children?
- Have you invited other professionals with expertise in working with families to observe and offer comment on your project?
- Is there any training provided locally e.g. in a local children's centre relating to engaging with families, which you can participate in?

The content of EYMM projects and sessions

- Who decides on the content of an EYMM project? Does it build on the lived experience of children and families or do you always assume you know best what an EYMM project should contain?
- What attempts are made to find out what EYMM goes on in families outside of sessions e.g. in the home and local community?
- Are families encouraged to continue with aspects of the EYMM programme outside of sessions? If so, how is this presented and is there an opportunity to discuss this?
- Do you think of EYMM activity in its broadest sense (to include e.g. a wide variety of experimentation with sounds and music genres)?
- Does the content of a project or individual session make families proud of their backgrounds?
- Can the project actively challenge commonly held stereotypes relating to e.g. 'race', gender and class or does it reinforce these stereotypes?
- How open are you to criticism? What tools do you use when eliciting feedback from families on a particular EYMM project?
- Are these tools appropriate for the particular families you engage with? Do you gain a detailed account of different families' perspectives on your work?
- Do you use this data to feed forward to any new projects?
- Do you elicit feedback during the 'life' of an EYMM project to explore whether it is meeting the needs and expectations of families? If you do this, are you willing to change any pre-planned activities in a programme accordingly?

How EYMM projects and sessions are delivered

- Are the skills and knowledge of all families valued in sessions? How is this achieved?
- Are you sensitive to cultural differences in communication? Are you wary of interpreting noise levels, 'looks', body language or spontaneous hugs and kisses as 'inappropriate'?
- Do you try to see your EYMM provision through the eyes of families who might not fit people's 'norms'?
- Can families bring food for their children to eat during sessions or is refreshment provided? How is this viewed?
- Are families made to feel welcome when they have a child who has difficulty conforming to the style of delivery of your programme?
- Are sessions organized in a way that is highly structured or in a way that is less structured/ flexible (or maybe a combination)? Have you elicited feedback from parents as to their preferences and why?
- Have you elicited feedback from early years' practitioners (EYPs) experienced in planning and delivering activities for very young children about the style of delivery of your programme? Have you had an opportunity to observe EYPs in their work e.g. engaged in creative play activities? What might you learn from this?

The importance of establishing and sustaining relationships

- The quality of relationships which are established and maintained underpin many of the previous points. These relationships might include practitioners within an EYMM project team; EYMM practitioners and other key professionals e.g. nursery staff; EYMM practitioners and key strategic staff e.g. heads of children's centres or managers of family services; and finally (and crucially): relationships between EYMM practitioners and families.
- Is time built into the project which will enable you to establish and maintain relationships with a range of professionals and agencies?
- What strategies do you have for forging new relationships and sustaining existing relationships when many services and professionals with whom you work are facing uncertain futures? How can you 'future-proof' your project?
- In working with families, do you maintain high levels of warmth and low levels of criticism?

Translating these ideas into an action research project

- So far we have looked at what is meant by 'action research' and we have shared some insights in relation to engaging families in EYMM. Of course there are many other questions that might be posed in relation to practice – this is meant as a starting point. A central idea in action research is the need to reflect critically on practice as this is crucial in affecting change.
- Earlier on, we thought about action research as a cycle and suggested that it differs from everyday practice owing to the systematic data gathering that occurs at each stage. Often, at the beginning of a project, you might have a 'hunch' that something needs improving, but on closer reflection (and with reference to data gathered) the issue may be quite different than initially imagined.
- This final section of the action research toolkit aims to think about some research methods or 'tools' you might use in your action research project. We have thought about this in relation to four basic components of a typical action research cycle.

1) Starting point: Identifying an issue and finding out more about it

- You are likely to start your research by discussing the issue that concerns you with your EYMM project team – for example your concern might be around engaging young parents in EYMM.
- Crucially, you then need to ask people's permissions to carry out a piece of research – this will include signed permissions from all practitioners and parents involved in your EYMM project. People need to know what you are trying to do and why (the notion of 'informed consent'); the methods you hope to employ (interviews, written observations, videos of sessions etc...); assurances of anonymity and confidentiality; assurances about how the data will be managed; and an indication of how you hope to use the data gathered (perhaps it will be used as a report for the Youth Music website or a conference paper). Although very young children cannot give consent in the same way as adults, you should also be mindful that children give and withdraw their consent during sessions in the way they dip in and out of interest in what is happening and so should not be coerced into participation.
- These permissions might be on a written A4 sheet, but sometimes it might be more appropriate to get a group together and explain in person what you hope to do and why. In this way, families are able to ask you questions directly from the outset.
- Then you will need to do some systematic research to find out more about the issue that concerns you.

- Maybe you need to ask someone other than your team to observe a session with a critical eye and make notes to share with you later.
- You might carry out a focus group interview with particular families; possibly a questionnaire might be employed (but always remembering the levels of literacy of families you work with).
- You may need to consider how you access a particular group i.e. if no young parents have attended your EYMM project in the past you may need to think creatively about how you will elicit their perspectives on why this is the case (possibly through working closely and sensitively with a local family worker).
- These are just suggestions and there are many other methods you might employ.

- We'd strongly suggest that you also keep a reflective journal to document your thoughts on the research process.

- In action research, almost any research method might be employed. The key is ‘fitness for purpose’. Therefore, any methods chosen need to help gather the data you need to explore your focus question in greater detail.
- Once you have gathered some data, you then need to begin to analyse this and in doing this, be reflective of your practice and open to criticism. After all, action research aims to improve practice. Think about what the data is telling you so far – from the heaps of comments you have gathered, can this information be organized into some sets containing similar perspectives? In doing this, you will have begun a process of systematically analyzing your data, which will help with the next stage.

2) Planning changes

- At this stage, you will need to work with your team to plan changes to your practice in order to affect an improvement to an aspect of work relating to engaging with families.
- Usually this might be done at a meeting (you might ask if you can record this as this too might be ‘data’ in an action research project). You might like to think who else you could include at this meeting – it might be a representative from a parent group or a key person/early years’ practitioner; or an outreach worker from a children’s centre.
- At this time it is useful to plot your plans of action onto paper so everyone is clear who will do what; when and how (but allowing for flexibility within this of course). These changes might relate to where you advertise your EYMM; liaising with a local health centre (which you have not done before perhaps); or asking a group of families who you hope to engage in EYMM about the music they enjoy at home and planning a project that uses this as a starting point. There are some reflective questions for practice contained in the coloured boxes earlier on in this toolkit. You might want to use some of these as a starting point for some reflective discussions.

3) Monitoring changes

- Once you have some plans in place you need to monitor these changes. This monitoring might be through systematic monitoring of attendance during sessions; videoing sessions (extremely useful in helping a team to reflect together on what is happening in a session – but you need to be very clear with participants how the data will be used, especially if you intend to share it with a wider audience when disseminating your project); asking a team member or someone outside of the team (if available) to undertake detailed observations of some sessions with a focus on how families engage with the music-making.
- By undertaking a systematic approach to monitoring, you will have data to reflect upon during the ‘life’ of the project but also well beyond it.

4) Evaluating the impact of these changes

- We expect that you are used to evaluating any project that you have been engaged in and these evaluations are important in helping to identify the degree of success of different projects and potentially, for securing funding for delivering EYMM projects in the future. This, of course, could result in silencing the perspectives of families who have found it difficult to engage with your EYMM project or could mean that you downplay the negative aspects that any project will inevitably encounter.
- This is understandable in a time of budget constraints, but in order to reflect critically on the impact of

an action research project it is important to review everything the data is telling you about your project. Often, it is the ‘voices’ outside the ‘mainstream’ that tell so much about the services offered to families.

- It is also important to remember that when trying to engage with families – especially those who may have found it difficult to engage with a range of early years’ services and not just those involving EYMM – small steps forward may be highly significant. This is where a rigorous approach to collecting data is so important – it is your evidence!
- In sharing successes and sharing the difficulties encountered in a project, other EYMM projects can also learn from your project.
- Finally, it is inevitable that when evaluating a project, new thinking about how to enhance practice is generated. This is why Kemmis and Taggart (2005) prefer to think about action research as series of spirals rather than a unitary, cyclical representation. So, it may be that an action research project is the catalyst for further research.

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