

Ballroom Babies Case Study

**Art
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Paul Hamlyn Foundation
Special Initiative

Developing
Practice in
Participatory
Settings



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About the Project

Aberdeen Performing Arts' 'Music Hall Babies' project started in September 2017. It aspires to engage with as many babies born around this time as possible, by delivering free bi-monthly workshops throughout the first year of their lives.

The multi-arts programme comprises part of 'Stepping Out', Aberdeen Music Hall's redevelopment initiative, the aim of which is to reach the city's wider community and develop new audiences. When the venue re-opens, each participating child will be a year old and included in the celebrations.

Using the Toolkit

Initially, the project team discussed the toolkit, delegated roles and confirmed timeframes for activity. The group went on to study the kit in detail before meeting again. This was their first step in using the resource.

The next was to build a project compass using questions provided by the toolkit. 10 questions were chosen, two from each of its five categories. Lisa Mathieson (APA's Creative Learning Manager), in partnership with Lindsay Dawson from Aberdeen City Council, shortlisted the questions for the team to discuss while at a workshop run by Creative Scotland. The compass was typed up and transferred into the provided word document template, and then used by the Project Evaluator to devise feedback questions for participants.

It was decided that taster sessions should be run to give 'Music Hall Babies' the best possible chance of success. The toolkit got everyone thinking about how to create a comfortable and welcoming learning environment, while the workshops' interactive, arts-based activities were intended to strengthen the bond between parents and babies. Mums, dads and carers were encouraged to socialise with each other while providing conversational feedback.

Evaluation

The compass was regularly referred to throughout the project's delivery. At the end of the second and final workshop, the team had a reflective meeting and asked themselves "Was it the best it could be?" The toolkit played a prominent role at the evaluation stage of the project as it did in its planning and development.

Testimonial

"As a team, we were encouraged by the use of the project compass (tool 3) to hone-in on what we wanted to achieve from the pilot sessions," says APA's Lisa Mathieson. ***"By committing to using our bespoke compass we had a ready-made checklist at hand at all stages of the project. As a result we were continually evaluating and questioning [our work]. We felt our workshop planning was better than it had ever been because we had carried out a very detailed action plan alongside our detailed learning outcomes.***

"The observation and reflection template was particularly handy for the project evaluator to check if we were achieving our goals. We created our own prompt questions based on our specific learning outcomes. As the project drew to a close, our evaluation session was made easier by having the compass at hand to refer back to."

Conclusions

The decision to run a pilot project was primarily influenced by the toolkit, however the group found itself able to exercise autonomy even while adhering to its suggested processes and structures.

Feedback revealed participants were aware of the care that had gone in to planning the events and activities. The reduction in stress and time saved by extensively collaborating as a team at the onset of the project was a positive surprise to all, while the evaluation sessions were found to be uncomplicated and enjoyable. Using the toolkit resulted in trial and error being applied before workshop delivery and not during it.

It's worth noting that using the toolkit wasn't an entirely positive experience for the group. Some were hesitant to take ownership of it and adapt it to suit their own needs, a necessity when transferring it across a variety of projects.

Overall, however, the group admitted the toolkit made them realise they had not been as thorough with previous projects as they could have, or thought they were being at the time.

“The compass has reiterated the importance and need for regular reflection and questioning at all stages of the project,” says Lisa. ***“We are now more open minded about exploring different approaches for feedback from participants... Using the compass to help write the feedback questions ensured that they were relevant and specific to the learning outcomes and therefore made the evaluation process much simpler.”***