



Soundwaves Case Study - 2016/2017

How can creative music making build resilience and encourage expression for military families with under 5s in the Plymouth area?

Ahoy project

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Evaluation Report on 'Ahoy', an early years music project for Take Art by Rachel Thame

Through the Ahoy project we hoped we would:

- Nurture an interest in music for the early years children and families who participated in the workshops.
- Expand musical skills and develop awareness of the power of music to support development of social skills, communication and well-being across social groupings.
- Encourage children to engage in self-initiated music-making
- Encourage parents and supporting early years workers to value and effectively support these self-initiated explorations.
- See music enabling connections on a social level



This project was specifically targeted towards supporting early years children from Naval families in Plymouth. Children of military or service families are exposed to unique experiences, which may include; separation from a parent, frequent moving of house, caring for a sibling or parent or sudden deployment from a combat zone – all of which may impact on the way children lead their lives. The challenges each child or Service family face are different, however Service children who face regular moves from home and school can suffer high levels of anxiety and stress, also their health and their ability to learn may be disrupted especially when their parents are deployed to armed conflicts overseas. In addition, children with additional or complex health needs may find continuity of care a problem due to regular moves and may feel isolated or find it difficult to cope without the support from the extended family or local community networks.

The early years music project **Ahoy** worked with support from the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Welfare department. Key workers and volunteers from Drake and the Crownhill Community centre supported and assisted families at the sessions. The 20 week project recruited participants across all backgrounds and working roles within military life.



Together, we wanted to explore the question ***“How can creative music making build resilience and encourage expression for military families with under 5s in the Plymouth area?”***.

The project quickly established that by creating an enabling environment where a socially diverse group of participating families were able to meet regularly and engage in music-making together, we were able to look not only at how early years children make music with their families, but also explore what the connective elements that contribute towards successful social cohesion might be.

It was quickly apparent that there are many undercurrents to the social complexities that underpin military life. There was a strong feeling of natural divide between the aspirations, social behaviours and friendship groupings between mums that were wives of officers and mums that were not. The first few weeks presented many challenges outside of the usual expected dynamics of group music-making with small children, and they were mostly centred around the behaviours of the supporting adults and the discrepancy between the social groups. Some mums were very unused to a child-focused, supported play environment. They had not had previous experience of attending ‘baby yoga’ or ‘baby signing’ classes, their experience lay with community play dates and chatty coffee mornings. Equally on the other side of

the social spectrum, many mums were used to formal circle group, adult-led activities, but lacked the intuitive play-based responsive approach to child-led supportive interactions.

“Each culture or cultural subgroup has its own beliefs and values which are reflected in differences between the practices that are used to socialize new members...into that particular group.” (Rogoff 2003)“

One of the strongest and most exciting unplanned outcomes of Ahoy, was that the project did enable connections to be formed across social divide. Trying to identify what aspects of the project helped the group to bridge divisions, became a key area to reflect upon.

Key factors that we noticed during the project, which I believe contributed to this feeling of developing cohesion and bridging of divide included:

- Engagement in musical activity created a level playing field. Music is socially inclusive and crosses class divide; there was no telling who would bring the most musically-strong contribution to the group. Shy mums presented as confident singers and players, and confident, outgoing mothers expressed feeling insecure about their musical abilities or singing voices. Mums were united in sometimes being required to step outside of their comfort zone to fully participate alongside their child in the musical activities. Designing musical activities with a specific focus on adult involvement and the acquisition of new musical skills such as singing new songs and rounds, or learning simple ukulele chords became integral to weekly planning.
- Music is the glue that ties everyone to a shared experience.
- Being a parent: the shared experience of being a mother offered support and understanding across the group.
- Children themselves, and being in their environment: being in a space together where children are the focus of everyone’s energy and attention.
- Being a parent within the military; but also noticing the differences and potential inherited and anticipated divides between social classes (Naval Officer’s wives mixing with wives of men on the ground) and reflecting on how deeply ingrained these class divides are.

- Music functioning as a non-verbal activity enables connection. This was actively developed within the sessions where periods of a 'no speaking' rule was introduced. Parents were encouraged to share and connect through playing musically with the children, not seeking to articulate verbally what is happening or offering guidance or directions. This encouraged a sense of musical connection and enabled everyone to engage, especially pre-verbal children and shy or emotional children; it enabled mothers to develop listening and responsive parenting skills, encouraged attachment between mums and children and developed connection across the Ahoy group.
- Creating an environment that supported musical play within early years. These sessions did not slip into a pre-existing early years setting or community group. Whilst this was also one of its challenges, it meant that we all had to work together to build a group that was valued by those that attended it. Music was the thing on offer not toys!



The format of the music sessions developed in direct response to the needs of the group. It quickly became apparent that a priority would be to get the mums actively involved in music-making in order to stop loud chat, broaden social engagement between groups of mums and deepen the level of engagement with their children. This was achieved through adult-led group music making in circle format. We sung familiar tunes and learnt new songs and rounds from around the world. We explored familiar and new instruments. Although the first few weeks were new and challenging, a culture

of participation and engagement quickly developed across the group for both adults and children. We built in a coffee break where I remained in the music area to support play, mums were then free to have a break and chat with welfare staff. The modelling of supported free exploration and the encouragement of voice play became a significant development. As the weeks progressed, Mums became more actively involved in this area and less concerned with the coffee and chat break! There were also developments in the parent's ability to guide their children in quality musical explorations with less "sing everyone Twinkle Twinkle – you're good at that" moments, and many more shared musical interactions between and across families.



The main objectives running throughout facilitation of this project were:

- To design activities and opportunities for musical play that encouraged children and their parents to participate in an integrated way through group music-making
- Exploring and developing emotional sensitivity through listening to music and participating in musical play, games and movement.
- Developing creativity through music-making
- Developing musical responses to defined musical characteristics such as tempo, pitch & timbre.



Challenges to the project we observed and reacted to included:

- Obtaining active engaged involvement from all participating parents.
- Allowing individual pathways and experimentation – responding to individuals whilst simultaneously encouraging group involvement.
- No early years trained professionals supporting the group other than the music leader. Whilst this was challenging in terms of legacy and project sustainability, it led to a deeper connection with the parents involved through sharing, articulating and seeking understanding and motivations for individual children's responses. It also led to a deepening and developing skillset within early years for the Navy welfare department and volunteers.
- Chatty parents creating an initially cliquey atmosphere
- Challenges of the environment. As the community centre where the workshops took place was not an early years setting, the music leader had to bring absolutely everything into the environment.
- Working within time constraints - Summer holidays / limited time scale to project.

Ahoy successes observed included:

- Social cohesion! Stronger relationships, empathy, tolerance and understanding developed between the children, their parents, the music leader and support staff.
- Strengthened family relationships with Naval Welfare department.
- Parents and children showed improved confidence to engage and experiment musically
- Strengthened shared understanding of the value, importance and power of music and musical play in early years.
- Improved attachment between parents and children.
- Bonding and sharing between parents through shared musical experience.
- Shared learning and braveness to explore as parents and children were offered new experiences, working alongside each other to expand their musical horizons.
- Reflection time with volunteers and support staff. Looking back on footage and photos, making time to consider what was going on, thinking about how to actively encourage, support and develop musical engagement for each child and support parents to be active musical play partners was invaluable to the project, expanding the music leaders practice by supporting this reflective thinking time.

Looking back to the research question with specific regard to one particular family and their musical journey with little boy “w”. This particular family came to the first Ahoy session and remained at the edges for a good few weeks. “w” presented as a very clingy, desperately shy boy with reduced social skills, low confidence and struggling to engage in social interactions. Mum was heavily pregnant and dealing with family life alone whilst her husband was deployed in Afganistan.

Over the weeks “w” sat on mums lap and struggled within the group time to directly engage, mum was concerned about his lack of confidence but also vocalised that he was taking in all the new songs and activities and trying them out at home in his safe space alone. “W” enjoyed watching musical interactions between adults and children from a distance but continued to prefer not to join in. We continued to gently encourage and offer musical stimulations and opportunities and at week 10 we had a huge breakthrough whilst exploring ukuleles for the first time. “w” took one up onto mums lap and then wouldn’t give it up until the end of the session. Over the next few weeks we secured “w’s” special uke as his own to explore on his own terms each week, and by week 16 he was off mums lap and starting to share his explorations with other children and myself. Mum bought ‘w’ his own uke for his birthday. By the final few weeks “w’s” interest had extended to my big guitar and he allocated himself the primary setting up and packing away little guitar man.



Early days!



Later on!

What does this journey show us about about developing resilience, what supported this little boys musical growth and progression successfully, what did we learn and could the results be replicated in a similar situation?

We feel that the Ahoy programme was successful for this little boy and his family in part because we were able to create a conducive mutually supportive environment in which he was safe to creatively explore. The music making itself helped strengthen connections for him to interact socially and provided the framework for those interactions. Expectations for him to “join in” were minimised and enabled him to engage on his own terms. Mum was supported in the environment and was able to show her own enjoyment of the music through her active participation, thus modelling the pleasure of musical interactions to her son.

Overall, the success of the Ahoy project demonstrates how it is the bringing together of people through shared musical community activity that strengthens connections between divided social groups. Creating social shared experiences enables the development of resilience across dynamic social landscapes. What was surprising about this project was that the group dynamic functioning smoothly became as much about identifying the needs of the parents as of those of the children. One key enabler, mum and volunteer was absolutely integral to the success of the project. As a key connector, she moved between the initial social fractions and encouraged communication and chat between the mums. Through bringing together families with differing experiences and expectations regarding attending parent / toddler groups; re-defining the ‘coffee morning’ for some, and also re-defining the franchise based, paid-for (and often assumed ‘educational’) toddler activity for others, a new shared and valued musical experience was created which crossed the divide. Mums, babies, toddlers and families were able to take musical steps

together; sing and dance with their community!

