



Exploring how deaf children respond to a range of musical activities

Funded by Youth Music

Final Report by Emma Hutchinson

The Little Crickets babies and toddlers music group comprised of children with severely impaired hearing loss, or with recent cochlear implants, rendering new ways of listening and training that might be required. The Music House for Children ran music and movement sessions each week for a period of three terms by request as a result of the Cathnor Children's centre to find independent funding to enable this project to continue. Some of the finance was put forward by the parents as they noted benefits that music had on their child that was additional to clear musical engagement and enjoyment.

Who?

Ella – approximately 18 months
Veronika – approximately 18 months
Ernie – approximately 30 months
Eliza (hearing) – approximately 18 months
Audrey – approximately 32 months
Alex – approximately 30 months
Samaya – approximately 2 years

What?

Weekly lessons of up to one hour, allowing for welcome and chill time consisted of singing, moving, instrumental play with encouraged interaction from the parents and/or carers.

Towards the end of the spring term 2009 the following changes and responses were noted from the children and parents that attended.

Responses

Ernie uttered Quack in pitch when I did the same. He then began to sing his own song using simple vocabulary and sounds. Alex, normally shy and reserved in response took my claves and played them tip tap, on his mother's knee. He was responding to the vibrations he could feel from his mother gently moving her knee in time.

Audrey uttered "beep beep" when I had played the car horn, went to a toy car and opened the door. She uttered "Emma" as she pointing, as though she expected me to get into the car.

Veronica uttered several "la la la" sounds in repetitive response to songs. Audrey then played her maraca exactly in time to my own playing (on the cornet) to "one man went to mow". When moving too, Audrey called my name many times, whilst walking unaided by her mother. She performed a real march, by moving her arms firmly back and forth in time to the cornet music. She uttered "diddy da" sounds as she spun round to go the other way (as suggested many times by myself). Audrey then went 'up and down' by uttering "up" and "down" in response. During the time when I played the guitar, I knocked on the sound box. Audrey said "knock knock".

Vocalising and Motion

We noted that vocalising and physical motion increased quickly in confidence and self-initiated response. The participants mirrored actions and sounds that they experienced, then made them their own. Occasionally they uttered sounds without movement. This suggested that my physical motion matched the sounds that they then made since they could 'hear' my movement through visual concentration. As long as I, the music leader remained animated and clear on my expectations of this group the children extended their physical activity to sound. Sound simply 'fell out' of each child's mouth at random times, yet, seemingly made sense in the scheme of what I, the music leader was doing.

Alex observed quietly through regular sessions. He appeared to be extremely focussed yet did not respond vocally, or do very much unless encouraged to do so by his mother. One day he pointed to the

claves in response to the tapping sounds they made and made clicking sounds with his tongue. He later, pointed to the cornet to indicate that I needed to play this.

An 'up and down' song was rewarded by Alex's arms going up and down in response. Paradoxically he was unhappy with the guitar playing and hid his head in his mother's lap frequently. This might suggest that he struggled with multiple layers of sounds (from six strings) that sounded unclear and mushy. Perhaps too, the chords interfered with his ability to focus since his aural capacity and learning was experiencing the recent cochlear implant and need to focus on linear (one lined) sounds.

This first term was very much about watching and absorbing the children's responses, how they responded and their preferences to specific activities, sounds and instruments. Characteristics were beginning to emerge, together with a developing trust of enjoying music with the music leader (myself) and their environment.

Newcomers V Regulars

The age range of the group and drop-in of occasional new participants sometimes made progress and responses harder to analyse since influences also included the repeated meet and greet, out of which gentle cohesion was often required to newcomers, unfamiliar with the music educator and environment. We know that relationship building is a key component in engagement, and with aural deficiency resistance was often greater since sound and activity may not have made immediate sense.

Empowerment

This term saw the continuation and completion of a monumental year of musical achievement and response by this group. Despite comings and goings of new participants, we enjoyed the regular company of 11 children between 2 and 5 years old. A significant pattern of responses emerged from the regular children involving the occasional new children joining in. They were empowered since each had been present each week and became the new 'leader' so as to show the newcomers what to do. Partial hearing children are often resistant to change, or new experiences. With musical engagement all the primary senses were involved (sight, touch (moving), hearing). The

less obvious psychological senses involving a feeling of well-being, emotional play, compulsion (to join in), also kicked in.

Musical activities looked so much fun that a new child would often feel compelled to join in – particularly when the regulars were clearly having a great time. Their message was that it was okay to participate, this was their time, their choice and the activities were subsequently manipulated or adjusted to support what they wanted and enjoyed.

Supporting communication

In hearing loss and over time, what went on outside of music making had some affect on a child's mood during sessions. Progressive musical play had to consider what went on before, e.g. eating times, bad weather, personal (home) issues. On many occasions music sessions became a respite or solution to communicative issues that occurred earlier. Through the ambience of different sounds and moves, the adult felt more able to communicate with their child. In parallel he/she was also able to see how music could calm or assist in communication by virtue of mutual engagement.

In music making a single component of activity, sound or instrumental play could help a deaf child to recall earlier experiences. By encouraging their responses through creative enabling (giving the child time and space) we could build up the child's confidence and feeling of self-worth. On several occasions the following examples were observed:

Silly sounds

We made silly sounds “brrrrr, ba, ba, ba, brrrrrr, diddly diddly dum”. Ernie went straight into a conversation with me (music educator) and his mother, and a toy, frowning, verbalising, and repeating the same sounds. He chatted and chatted.

Tuned percussion

I played the xylophone up on its end. Jonah uttered “up” “down” as I did so, and slapped the floor. Veronika slapped the floor each time. Waiting, and SLAP! Normally still and watchful, she was fully active with perfect timing.

Resources

When I brought the windmill out again Jonah said “whhhhaa”. He felt the blow of the letter as I uttered “W” and used my hand to illustrate the wind blowing. He copied and his arms whizzed around. Blowing, feeling, doing, all components of imitation, recognition and response – learning through doing.

Mouse

I introduced the whistle sound. I uttered “a mouse!” I brought out the mouse (puppet). Jonah chatted to the mouse. The mouse travelled up and down – and this, the children did with their arms, and the mothers too. Imitation empowered, engaged, and amused. Emotional well-being was confirmed, vocalising was compelled, individual and relevant, and musical comprehension occurred (pitch).

Windmill

Sounds of the wind were made by me (music educator). The “Blow” word was uttered, and each child copied with their lips, their arms made blowing actions and the activity made sense. Here, we can affirm curriculum links since the child referred to his/her world at large.

Musical instruments

Enjoying windy sounds with un-tuned percussion instruments continued the familiar theme, was coherent to the group, and afforded additional musical play, as well as the possibilities of story-telling. Jonah moved away from the group and returned with a storybook. Jonah’s desire for further activity indicated comprehension in the current activity and interest in developing this still further.

Framework of sessions

We noted the change or shift in focus when offering random activities as a consequence of retaining the structure e.g. going from instrumental play to moving with no apparent link. Only when we had a reason to shift – i.e. offered by the child then it was agreed that we should all get up and move.

This occurred in a session involving musical play, and then Audrey picked up the cornet and began to walk and play. At which point everyone got up and began to walk and play. We were off, mutually, and agreeably on an adventure.

Different frequencies in sounds offered

As earlier discussed, some frequencies are unpleasant in children with partial/complete hearing loss. Veronika responded to metallic sounds by blocking her ears and wincing her shoulders. Normal hearing is able to block or dampen unwanted or noisy sounds. In cochlear implants, the aural mechanisms have to be trained to decipher and to cope with different sounds. In music making and by making careful choice of instrumental/sound engagement, these children over time learnt to deal with, cope and even tolerate new sounds, or those they initially rejected.

For this reason the music educator continued to offer 'unwanted' sounds via an array of instruments and vocal sounds (trumpet, ukulele, guitar, glockenspiel, fife, cabasa etc.) By introducing and re-introducing these sounds, individuals slowly, over time, began to adjust their response and become indifferent, or even to participate in the sounds they heard. By hearing the sounds over and again, they learnt to manage new sounds – an important life skill in an urban environment.

Overview

The children gave more than just musical ability to their parents or carers. By participating together, the child and the adult learnt many things. They learnt

To be tolerant

To be creative together

To respect each other's responses

To take charge

To progress in communicative exchange

To engage as a group

To facilitate new or strange experiences

To musically develop together

To fine-tune mechanisms supporting hearing loss (hearing aids/cochlear implants)

Random chats with carers and parents helped them to understand the deeper implications of music making beyond simply learning to sing a song. Motor, vocal, focus, appraisal and creative thought were just some of the areas moving progressively forward throughout the project. The music educator and researcher helped families to see how direct participation helped themselves as well as their child, to understand why music making is so supportive, particularly with the take-home potential.

As a consequence of this music case study, the centre manager, parents and researcher could see how significantly music plays a part in a profoundly deaf child's overall development, and how quickly they made progress as indicated elsewhere in this report.

Continuing music making

Implications in continuing study and sessions could consider the benefits of flexible and regular music sessions to other types of groups held at the children's centre. Key benefits that emerged from this study were

A feeling of well-being

Positive mood enhancing

Communicative exchange

Comfortable with new experiences and people

Educational in other areas – language, counting, the world at large, leadership, team play

Credit is due to the music educator who shifted from the normal structure of 'music sessions' to explore responses using simple thematic pathways (summer, swimming, wind and so on) in conjunction with adapting musical skills to fit the children's direction of interest and development at that point.

Using the same skills it is plausible to suggest that similar music sessions in an open-access environment such as a children's centre could be offered to groups such as

Newborns and their families

Single parent families

Ethnic minority groups

Families from troubled or isolated circumstances

Disabled children

The benefits of music making such as noted in this case study has implications beyond just musical learning. If health and a feeling of well-being through musical engagement and joyful, shared experiences occurs, then the cost of a skilful music educator to facilitate regular musical experiences is surely a positive preventative measure worth considering, and one that is financially viable.

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