

What is co-creation? Energiser Fund Year 1 analysis

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Introduction

Introducing the Energiser Fund

The Energiser Fund was created to celebrate and energise creative practice with 2-4-year-olds.

Centring children's voices, views, and lived experience, the fund is exploring co-design and participation in creative projects for early years - thinking about how we do it, what good looks like, what happens when we do it, and what we can learn from co-creating creative activities with 2-4-year-olds.

11 organisations were awarded three-year grants to deliver creative programmes with 2-4-year-olds. Organisations regularly come together to network and reflect throughout the three years in a learning community. The learning community is coordinated by [Groundswell Arts](#), the Energiser Fund Learning partner.

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Our research question

The learning community collectively agreed a research focus for the fund:

What do we learn when exploring co-creation with children aged 2-4, their families, artists, practitioners and communities?

Within this we are also asking: What is it? How do we do it? Why do it? And what happens when we do it?

Introducing the Year 1 analysis

This analysis has attempted to answer the research focus for year 1 of the Energiser Fund learning community: 'what is co-creation?'

The research focus for year 2 is 'how do we co-create?' and some of the themes in this analysis begin to move towards the question of how, the ingredients or conditions that are needed for co-creation.

This reflects the fact that the question that we're more able to answer now is 'what is co-creation...for these people in these places and environments at this time?'. Given the context-bound nature of this work, it felt appropriate to include some contextual elements.

The data used in the analysis:

- Notes from reflection sessions
- Miro boards and presentation slides from reflection sessions
- Notes from in-person events
- Partner social media posts
- Interim reports submitted to Youth Music

- Notes from mentoring reports

We constructed the themes inductively, working from the data up, rather than allocating data into pre-existing themes. We used a process of familiarisation and then theme generation, through reading, highlighting, annotating, doodling and drawing diagrams, playing with post-its and cards, and making a mindmap in Miro. We took a qualitative approach that focuses on the importance of meaning rather than frequency of occurrence within the data.

As part of sense-making of the data Vanessa also created word collages, similar to a form of found poetry, using words and phrases from the data. They are included illustratively in this analysis, in boxes with white backgrounds and black outlines.

As part of the project, a face to face meeting was held in Bristol in November 2025. A draft of the analysis was shared with all the Energiser Fund community partners prior to this event, and during the session we discussed the community's reflections on the analysis.

Partners also made collages responding to the analysis and the year 1 question 'what is co-creation?'. Some of those collages are also included illustratively here (some collages included photos of children that could not be shared more widely for ethical reasons).

The analysis

Open-endedness

An important characteristic of co-creation across the Energiser Fund Learning Community (ELC) is the idea of being open-ended, rather than working with predetermined outcomes.

The 'creation' in co-creation could refer to many different things. It need not be a tangible output – it might be the creation of an artefact, a song, a dance or a piece of art that endures beyond the session or project. It might also be a fleeting interaction, a game that is never repeated, an energy.

Accordingly, rather than tightly planned activities, partners talked about provocations, invitations and offerings. Partners described the process as open, uncertain, non-linear, emergent, messy, and unexpected. There is a sense of freedom and that there are no right or wrong answers.

Curiosity and possibility thinking

The approach is underpinned by a sense of curiosity; exploring, experimenting and asking 'what if?'. This sense of curiosity spreads across the ecosystem of the project.

This might be practitioners recognising and valuing the child's curiosity, it might artists' curiosity about their own practice and a sense of 'what if we do this next time?', organisations might be curious about what would happen if they worked in a particular way, and also recognises Youth Music's curiosity in setting up the fund.

As one partner commented:

"By centring the child as artist, we can centre curiosity (both theirs and ours!)"



Exploring spaces and materials
in their own time

Cones, fabrics, rope,
Deep play

Paint brushes, powder, paper
Deeply absorbed

Wooden spoons, water, tubes,
Going deeper

Corrugated card, cups of water,
clay,
Follow their fascinations

Sounds that spring from places
of discovery

Layering and overlapping

Risk

Working in an open-ended way and working with the unknown is inherently risky.

Many practitioners and organisations have, in previous work, experienced being asked to teach in a more formal sense, to perform or produce their art form, create outputs and felt a need to prove their value.

As one partner commented “aaah it’s really excruciating to step back and not be leading and not be planning. And to say to another adult oh my god this is really hard”.

“Failure, dead ends, awkwardness, dissonance and destruction” are an inevitable part of the process and can be productive in finding new ways forward. For some partners the risk was exhilarating however and generative.

Despite a sense of open-endedness and a sense of freedom, partners articulated that there are also boundaries. These largely focus around safety.

Some partners had clear lists of “things to worry or not worry about”, “hard no’s” and conversely “things that are ok”.

The outcome will always be different
Different, non-linear and expansive
Messy but with pathways through
There is no right or wrong

Navigating the unknown
Messy
Uncertain
Risky

Wild at times
Looks chaotic
Nerve wracking
Not scary but...confronting

A crisis moment

A spanner in the works

Imposter syndrome

Awkwardness

Failure

Dead ends

Dissonance

Destruction

A period of learning

Slowly come out of the
chrysalis

Constant re-shaping

Transforming

Materials

Partners have also worked with spaces and resources as being or becoming more open-ended. Open-ended materials included the tangible, such as rope, fabric, cardboard, clay and paint, as well as the intangible, such as light, shadow and sound.

A partner noted that “Materials have possibilities” – they can become many different things, be used multimodally, individually or in groups, and used in different types of play or with different schemas.

Castles inhabited

Skyscrapers built

Oceans weaved

Blue fabrics waved like ocean currents

Bubble wrap and crepe paper

Texture to our underwater world

Large cardboard mermaid tails

A room transformed through
collective action

Whatever we create belongs to us all

Some art, a game or just an energy

Collaborative

Co-creation for the ELC is collaborative. It is important that everyone's perspectives are valued:

"Everyone has their own unique expertise, the children and the adults".
(ELC partner)

There is a sense of equity and various partners talked about aiming for non-hierarchical environments.

Partners described sharing and shifting power, ensuring "that everyone's contributions shape the outcome", noted that "it should be hard to tell who is a participant and who is a facilitator" and that "everyone is equal in the space".

For some partners the work is not only artistic but also informed by a social justice perspective. Within practice, this might look like ideas "bouncing back and forth between the children/adult carers/artists" (ELC partner). This could also be the recognition in reflection that "We all see different things, so it helps build up a picture of different things".

On a longer-term scale, partners have taken a collaborative approach to working with other professionals and organisations, trying to develop a sense of shared ownership over the whole life of the project.

While partners talked about the importance of everyone being valued equally, there is recognition that opportunities for exercising agency will look different for different people and at different times. This quote describes the different roles that are taken in the partner's project:

"The artists of course are leading in many ways - they design the session structures, select materials, provocations, shape the environment. Parents/caregivers and the Children's Centre staff decide when the session (and therefore the child's involvement to a degree) starts and ends.

However, within each session, there is a continual shift. Children show us what they are drawn to, how they want to use materials, what sparks their laughter / focus / interest / joy!

These moments ripple outward and inform future sessions, and public outcomes. Co-creation is not fixed, it is an ongoing exchange where agency moves back, forth and around between artist - child - material - family - practitioners."

Likewise for children their collaborations may look different: "some fully immersed, others engaging in quieter ways. Everyone contributing in their own rhythm."



The children shared their space with us

Before we shared ours with them

A child's eye view of a journey

Transforming

Running into the room on her own

Smiling, laughing, pushing boundaries

A sense of ownership

More playful

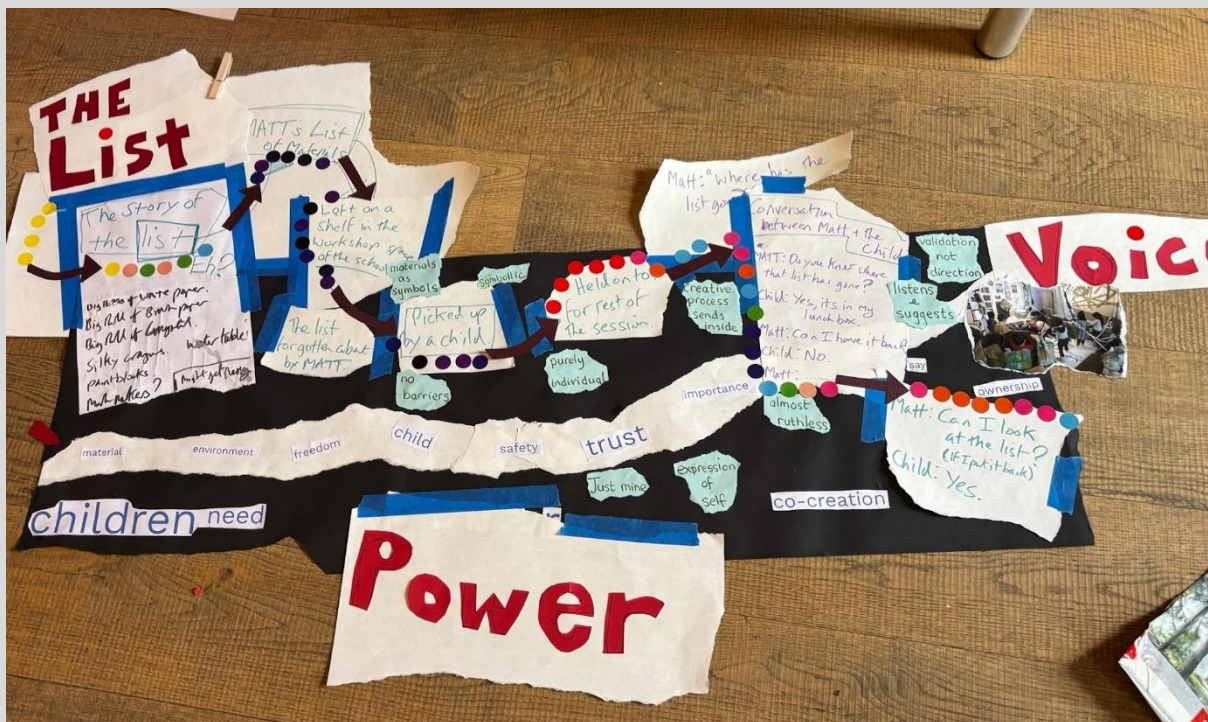
Seeing children as competent

A sense of collaboration is informed by partners' belief in the importance of seeing children as competent, or as experts.

Partners value children's knowledge, ways of knowing and see children as highly skilled, as "experts and leaders in their exploration of the space and materials".

For some partners, seeing children as competent is a way of disrupting or resisting dominant narratives where children are silenced, seen as blank or empty, and viewed as incapable of being creative.

Many partners are informed by a concern for children's rights and a desire to see children take up space in public life. Some partners hope to work co-creatively beyond sessions and projects, with one commenting that "we are looking to further break down barriers of access and participation at the gallery"



Responsive and attuned

Given its open-ended and unpredictable nature, the collaboration requires a responsive and attuned approach. It is not just a sharing of roles, tasks or labour, but there is a reciprocity or a contingency, where what one does is tied to what the other does.

Artists need to be able to respond to children (and other adults) in the moment, to make decisions about "when to hang back, and when to join in, when to 'leave' in order that the children create new and strange possibilities" (ELC partner).

“Co-creation looks different in each setting, shifting with each artist’s practice, and each session depending on which families are in the room and what they bring to the experience.” (ELC partner)

The practitioner role is a highly complex one and partners mentioned a vast array of roles including (but by no means limited to): welcoming children (and families); adding further resources to the environment in response to children’s interests; giving ideas; modelling; mirroring; making children’s creativity visible through documentation; observing; listening; noticing; joining in; asking questions; discussing; commenting; extending; scaffolding; echoing; supporting; being cheerleader; being technician; making alongside.

One partner noted: “Play in the moment is often communicated through non-verbal cues—gestures, eye contact, movement, and rhythm become the language of connection”. Accordingly, invitations and responses can be made via voices/materials/bodies and responses and interactions can be multimodal or intermodal.

Responding and making decisions requires knowledge of participants as individuals, their interests, home lives, and previous engagements: “I was able to understand what was interesting to him about that. We’d done quite a lot of work with him, I knew he was interested in buttons and how things work”.

There is also an affective dimension, with some partners mentioning the idea of empathy or, as one partner described, of “stepping into each other’s worlds”.

Thinking again about the ecosystems of the project, organisations likewise need to respond to continual learning and exploration to shape projects and provision accordingly.



- Hold back
- Observe more
- Listen attentively

- Notice
- Tuning in
- Listening with ears and bodies

- Zoom in and zoom out
- We all see different things
- Silence, like waiting, poised

Noticing, documenting and reflecting

Responses are also informed by ongoing noticing and reflection. Partners referred to ‘noticing’, particularly as an alternative to ‘observing’ and/or ‘listening’, which privilege a single sense or single way of communicating.

“Significant adults listen (not just with ears, but also with bodies and the other senses) and communicate understanding (not just with words but also bodies)”

“I was able to understand what was interesting to him about that...even though he wasn’t able to tell me in words.”

Partners aim to share reflections between everyone involved, using methods including group discussion, floor books, photo and video footage.

Some partners likened this to an action research cycle: “come with an offer - try it out, think about how it happened what it felt like and try again”.



Trust

Trust is needed across the web of relationships. It is important that children can trust adults with their ideas:

“We have noticed the child’s imagination becomes unlocked or grows within the sessions and over the project. We talked about this being an example of discernment about who you trust with your imagination. perhaps a sense of having to earn that privilege to see it or be let into it.”

Trusting partnerships between organisations or individuals require aligned values and commitment:

“This way of working can feel challenging and different from what may have been experienced before. We ask that people try it and trust us.”

This is not always easy. One partner noted the importance of “bringing staff on the journey, keeping them involved, informed and on board with the project” while another noted that “we need to be part of planning with the centre at the earliest point”.

There is also a sense that artists need to trust themselves, to trust in the process in the face of expectations:

“One of the quiet joys of the day was recognising how much more comfortable I’ve become with less structure – and how much trust I now have in the way interactions unfold when we’re attuned and responsive. My skills and experience are still present – but it no longer feels like I need to ‘do’ something. Instead, I find myself following the moment. Trusting it.”

“a lot of our families say that they don't go to groups because their child is the one that won't sit still”. Partners have been keen to reassure parents/carers so that they feel welcome. They have communicated the safety of materials and tried to give parents/carers and sense of permission to play.

Some partners conceive the parent/carer role as being important in facilitating the child's play. These partners encouraged parental engagement with the child and more active playful approaches.

For others, messaging focused on parents having freedom to be less involved, to “sit back and have a bit of time for themselves...if that's what you need that day.” One partner noted how rather than playing themselves, “Parents felt at ease, watching children play in many trusted hands”.

There is a delicate balance to be struck where parents/carers are resistant to more playful and messy activities or use of a space. Parents/carers may have erroneous assumptions about what is desired of them and their children in their space. Clearing up those expectations may remove barriers and anxieties for those parents/carers, be liberating and empowering, and very welcome.

However, parenting behaviours are also the result of different parenting styles and cultural approaches to childrearing. Attempts to modify those behaviours could also create further anxiety or barriers. Again, this relies on the practitioner's deep knowledge of the individual families they are working with and on unpicking these issues as part of relationship building.

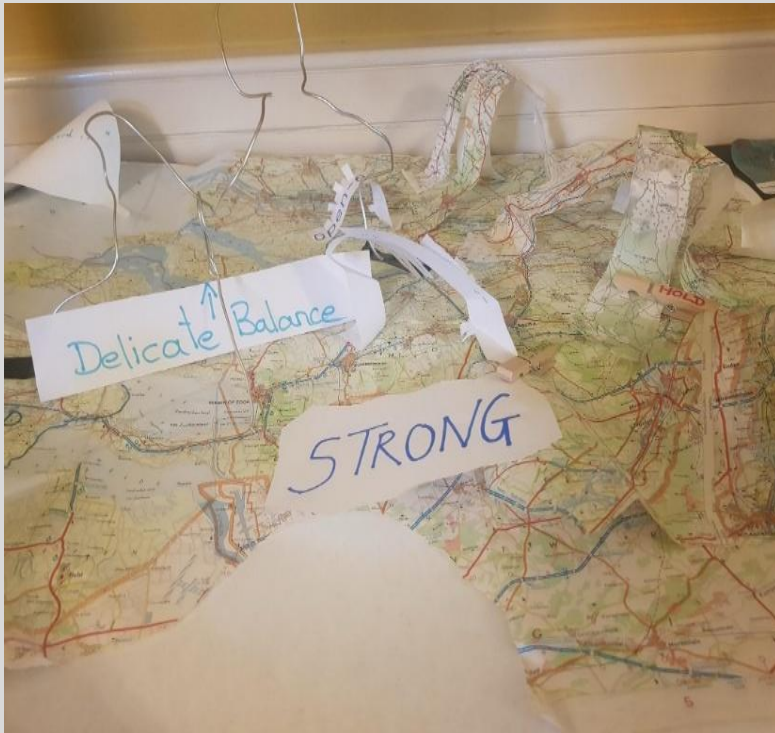
Familiarity and ritual

Although there is a sense of freedom in lots of this work, familiarity and repetition can also be supportive.

Some partners use posters, plain text documents, audio formats and spoken announcements to share names, information about facilitators and how sessions run with the aim of reducing participant awkwardness and anxiety.

Ritual aspects of sessions also allow participants to develop knowledge, familiarity and a sense of ownership. One partner noted how some individual children may gravitate to familiar activities and objects they know and love.

There is also a sort of shared ownership where everyone (that has been attending) might understand the rituals, as opposed to a sort of individual sense of ownership that might be more related to that child's experience or forms of capital in the space. Rituals particularly seem to focus on transitions, welcoming and saying goodbye.



It's the constant turning up for people

The familiar environment

Healing spaces

It's the constant turning up for people

Welcoming and closing

A sanctuary

It's the constant turning up for people

Tea, coffee, snacks

Rituals

It's the constant turning up for people

Embedded in everyday rhythms

Time and space

Building relationships, developing trust, developing partnerships, shared understandings, and reflecting on practice all require time.

Children need time to “explore and repeat schemas” (ELC partner), explore at their own pace, and for their “fascinations to emerge and evolve” (ELC partner). A practitioner noted how one child watched an activity for 20 minutes before participating more actively while other noted how children’s participation evolved over the course of weeks.

Practitioners need time to “observe, wait, listen”. “There are glimmers happening all around us which we can miss if we don’t choose to stop ourselves and notice the play of children” (ELC partner). This can be challenging and practitioners noted that they sometimes felt they should be “doing more”, or rather to “be seen to be doing or delivering”.

In the longer term, practitioners need time to experiment, develop approaches and build their confidence. Teams also need to talk, interact, get to know each other, debrief, and build relationships.

Partners gave examples of the scale of time needed:

"We're only just beginning to see change after 3 years of working together."

"The family worker has been there 22 years"

"4 months of outreach, we were in touch with over 100 families that we went to see in person, in mosques, churches, libraries, calling, texting, and of those over 100 people we got the interest of 13 families. So that already shows the lack of trust. And of those families we ended up having 5 join in sessions. It's one of the challenges that we face, that trust takes a very long time."

"It takes a lot of time to build trust. It takes time to develop those relationships. To have the conversations where you're sharing a vulnerability with each other and being open with each other. It just enables you to go to far deeper places.... It does have to be 3, 4, 5 year programmes."

This can be understood not just as having time but also as having a space where there is permission to go slowly, to explore, or to take risks.

Do they think we're just sat in the corner not doing anything?

Sitting with the slowness

Unhurried in a hurried world

A thoughtful approach

Slow, steady work

Spacious

A breathing out

Small moments of joy

It has taken a while

Despite the need for time, this is something that can be in short supply. Partners talked about a feeling of precarity and of being overworked and underpaid for those working across the sectors involved in the Energiser Fund, particularly those working freelance. Many also mentioned the challenges of the squeezing of the curriculum in early years to the detriment of arts and creativity, of a formalisation of early years education, and of a need for measurable outputs across their other work. These factors compromise the time available for developing meaningful relationships and practice. Many practitioners also mentioned working in isolation.

This raises questions about supporting the material conditions practitioners are working in, supporting the development of pedagogy and practice, as well as supporting the emotional wellbeing of those working to support children and families who are themselves experiencing poverty, trauma and other challenging circumstances.

The Energiser project seemed to offer a rare, welcome and valuable opportunity for partners to come together with others and share experiences.

On the ground

Tight deadlines

Small moments of joy

On the ground

Defined outputs

Joy as rebellion

On the ground

Overworked, undervalued, underpaid

Small moments of joy

Can't change the world

A beacon of hope in quite a barren
landscape

Magic in the everyday



About Youth Music

We're a national charity. We help marginalised young people to make and monetise music.

Every year, we raise £10 million to fund inspirational grassroots music projects and support aspiring young creatives up and down the UK.

We're campaigning to break down barriers for young people facing inequity, exclusion and discrimination.

Together with our partners, we're helping the next generation to transform their lives through music. [Join Us](#).

Youth Music Funding

Youth Music runs several grant programmes. Read more about them on the [Youth Music website](#).

Youth Music's Energiser Fund works across the arts, and is financed with National Lottery funding, which we receive through Arts Council England.