



# Seeds Creative

## Reflective Projects

# Being Child-Led in Online Early Years Music Sessions

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## Introduction

In the following report I am going to explore:

- Can Early Years Music online sessions ever be child led?
- From their experiences of lockdown, what techniques have workshop leaders used to promote child-led sessions? Which methods have they found most successful and why?
- What are the benefits of online sessions, and how can these be incorporated in Early Years Practice in the future?

Having been a workshop leader for ten years, it wasn't until 2020 that I had the opportunity to lead a workshop online. All the skills and ways of working that I had learnt over the past decade were very much shaken up and after getting over the initial nerves of leading online, I had to adapt to this new situation that we all found ourselves in.

As well as leading Early Years workshops on-line, I found myself leading music-making sessions for care-homes, young people on the fringes of the criminal justice system, intergenerational composition groups and hosting for various events.

But, for me, it was the early years workshops that created the most questions (and nerves); how could these sessions possibly be child led when we were not in the same space? Child initiated or child led sessions are really important to me; sessions where all the musical and creative clues, intentions and ideas are led by the children. As a workshop leader it's my job to create activities that promote space for exploration, engagement (in whatever way) and for Early Years voices to be heard. I believe that powerful Early Years practice is not about the leader imparting knowledge, but rather the leader learning from the participants, and being led by their ideas. Being in the same space makes it possible to react and use whatever musical clue that you are given. But I was apprehensive as to how well this could work online (with just a small zoom box connecting us). And furthermore, how could I still ensure that the sessions were playful, reactive and a bonding experience for the family unit?

I am one of the Chamber Tots leaders at Wigmore Hall, an arts venue in Central London. Chamber Tots is part of the learning programme, and we create sessions for 0-5 year olds and their families. Regarding these sessions, it was incredibly important that we explored methods and practical activities that promoted the pedagogy of child-led practise, something that strongly reflects the Wigmore Hall Learning ethos of creativity, collaboration and equality.



### Project Design

The first part of my research was having conversations with various leaders in this sector. I was fortunate enough to speak to:

- **Claire Hastings**- Folksinger Songwriter and creator of Claire's Music Club, a weekly online session for Early Years
- **Polly Ives**- Musician, Animateur and creator of Concerteenies which won a 2020 Inspiration Award from the Royal Philharmonic Society
- **Esther Sheridan**- Musician, Workshop Leader and Chamber Tots Lead at Wigmore Hall
- **Rachel Swanick**- Music Therapist who has led Muso Baby, virtual sessions with the Manchester Museum for parents at risk of postnatal depression and/or anxiety

The second part of my research consisted of attending various talks and reflection sessions about leading Early Years Sessions on-line, as well as sessions aimed at workshop leaders working in other spaces within the community. Some of the talks and training that I attended included, Nate Holder's *Decolonising Music in the Early Years* for Sound Connections, a reflection session on activities when working with Early Years online run by Soundcastle, a coaching session run by Young People in The Arts and I also was lucky enough to receive some training for Trauma Informed Practice by Kazzum.

The last part of my research was a more practical approach. As previously mentioned, I am a Chamber Tots leader at Wigmore Hall, alongside Esther Sheridan and Penny Osmond, and part of moving our Chamber Tots sessions online was recording the original sessions and having two focus groups with participants, which could then be watched back and reflected upon. During this process I was able to see participant data, as well as watch my own practice back and reflect on the first two child-led focused points of my research.



## **Findings**

### **What do child-led Early Years Music online sessions look like?**

Looking back on my original research idea, it's very obvious to me in hindsight that I was dubious as to whether Early Years online workshops could ever be child-led. I have been incredibly surprised therefore at how child-led I have found some workshops to be. Through the following practical methods and activities I have found that online sessions can create the same explorative, creative and welcoming space (as in-person sessions) that promotes child-initiated music making.

Practical methods and activities include:

### **Having a clear structure and theme**

Having a clear and consistent structure has definitely helped our Chamber Tots model to move online. We'll all start with a clear hello moment (whether that's a song, or a musical jam), then go and explore the theme of the session (e.g Animal Adventure, Winter, Under the Sea etc.). This exploration will normally consist of three or four different activities that will have a contrasting energy to them e.g energetic, singing, making, sleeping, playing etc. Then there will be a clear Goodbye moment before the session ends. Furthermore, we work with a musician to add another creative dimension to the session, and to have another soundworld with which the child can interact (and lead) with.

We've found that having a theme really helps online- and guardians have fed back that it helps them to prepare the child for the session, and gives them a hook to explore after their experience (this is very similar to the in-person sessions).

I found that this emphasis on structure was something that the leaders I talked to felt similarly about, as well as being evident in sessions I observed online.

### **Changing the name on zoom and saying hello!**

It's important to ask families to put the name of the child as the name on their zoom box- then you can clearly communicate with each child and family. Saying hello to every child, using their name in a hello song, is a simple activity, but one that can greatly promote child-led music sessions- TV doesn't say Hello! It adds a sense of togetherness, a sense of community and a proper welcome to start off a session. Even in the sessions which are on Facebook Live, (or another platform where you can't see who is joining in) by parents and guardians using the chat function, they can let the leader know who is watching (and also interact during the session by suggesting actions, songs etc.).

### **Musical improvisation**

In the Chamber Tots sessions we work with an additional supporting musician- we have found that musical improvisation works really well online and it's a really successful way at promoting child-led activity. It can be vocal based (e.g a child speaks to the alien we've met in Space, and the musician 'speaks' back with their instrument), or the gestures, actions or movements of a child on the screen inspire what the musician will play.



### **Having a exploring/ foraging exercise**

It's been very important in the Chamber Tots sessions, which are 45mins, not to have the child focused on the screen all the time. Penny Osmond (another Chamber Tots leader) came up with the idea of having an exploring/ foraging moment- during the session there will normally be an opportunity for the child to go off and find something that has been hidden by the adult- e.g some treasure, an animal or something that we might find in whatever location the session is set. Because they are items that belong to the children, they are often very keen to tell us about them, or quite confident to suggest what this means in terms of the story- thus leading what happens next. Even for those who are non-verbal, the way that they interact with the object, or the way they hold it to the screen, gives the workshop leader lots of opportunity to follow the child.

### **Having an accessible props list**

As families are no longer having to leave their home and make a journey to the session, we have found that creating a props list (including the hidden items) can be an effective way in preparing the child for the session instead, as well as helping everyone to feel part of the same experience.

It's very important that this props list is accessible and not too specific e.g something that you can make a sound with instead of an instrument, some treasure that you might find under the sea, for example a book or a favourite cuddly toy.

### **Composition activity**

Composing a soundscape or sound story during sessions gives an opportunity for everyone to make some music together unmuted. Collecting five or six sounds that are linked to the theme, or an action and putting them together is a simple way to compose something special for a specific group. As there is no pulse, it doesn't matter about time delay, and rather focuses on the fact that these online sessions can provide a meaningful musical, child-led, experience.

### **Using the whiteboard on zoom**

On Zoom there is a function which allows everyone to draw and mark-make on the same whiteboard. Encouraging families to do this as they listen to a piece of music, or explore what they see around them is a successful way at creating a graphic score for musicians to interpret (as well as providing another way for participants to interact and engage with the session).

### **Completing/ changing lyrics**

Completing or changing lyrics to a song, especially early on in the session, reinforces the idea that the session is interactive (and not a TV show). A simple travel song to where-ever the story of the session is based is an effective way at collecting different modes of travelling, changing the lyrics to whatever the suggestions are, and arriving in a new place. This lyric change also encourages people to move around their space in different ways.

Furthermore I find changing and creating lyrics at any point in the session is an important opportunity to reaffirm to adults that there isn't a right or wrong answer, and I don't have any expectations of the child/ the adult. For example in a session where we travelled into the forest, a child suggested that we swim there. I then encouraged the whole group to swim to the forest and I could see the adult on the screen relax as their child had absolutely not got it 'wrong'.

### **Building something**

Similar to the exploring and foraging exercise, encouraging families to build something where they



are encourages time away from the screen, whilst still being part of a bigger session. Building things to go along with your theme (e.g a rocket for space, a den for the forest, a sea bed for under the sea) helps to reinforce what's going on, adds to the storytelling aspect, and provides a physical activity. Again, similar to the props list, it's important that the things you use to build are things that most families will have e.g a towel, a sheet, a jacket, a cushion but it's essential that the leaders provides a non item option, such as encouraging the family to move where they are in the room i.e moving into the rocket, switching off the light and now they are in the den!

### **Exploring the proximity of the screen**

One of the really special things about working online is that visually, everyone can see a prop, instrument, the leader, the musician in the same proximity- it doesn't matter where you are in the physical circle. Furthermore, the leader can play around with how close props are held to the screen, and how they appear on screen e.g making it look like it appears or moves by itself. Likewise with instruments, the musician can be very creative in how the participants see it. For example a woodwind or brass instrument being played directly down the camera is a pretty exciting thing!

Esther Sheridan led a Winter Chamber Tots and decided to have a snowball fight (with paper) towards the screen, as well as the animals everyone found in the session tobogganing down a slide towards the screen.

Using the full opportunity of the screen can add a real playfulness to sessions, and help to bring that sense of community and closeness.

### **Unmuting moments**

Unmuting moments are a fantastic opportunity for connection and that togetherness moment. For example, if the leader has a strong percussion-based riff, then participants can join in with their sound-makers and play along. Although musically, it can be a bit disconcerting for the leader, the aim of the unmuting moments is to allow space for other voices and to hear their sounds. This brings an equivalent 3D moment to sessions, bringing them alive. Other unmuting moments that work well include things like making a rainstorm, talking to animals and going through other soundscape based activities.

### **Moments of Chaos**

Another activity which I think provides opportunities for child-led practice is allowing space for those moments of chaos. Obviously one cannot control chaos, but as a leader, you can help to encourage it by providing a space for it to exist. In in-person sessions at Wigmore Hall, there would be free-play time at the end of a session, however online, I think it's about fitting unstructured moments into the journey of the session itself e.g giving a minute to encourage children to explore the new 'place' that we've arrived in.

### **Musical Drones**

Musical drones are a very successful way at having musicians and leaders make music together at the same time- as one holds one note, or shifts within the same key, one leads the melody, or musical idea. This technique works well on the zoom platform and helps to build a bigger body of sound that is richer and more reflective of an in-person session.



Along with the practical activities and methods there are also some qualities that as a workshop leader, I needed to consider within my practice.

If people are only seeing a third of you, then that third has to account for your whole body- and your whole commitment to the activity. As a leader, I've had to be more convinced by my ideas than ever before, and my facial expressions, gestures and energy has to be more exaggerated than in in-person sessions- at times making me feel like a children's presenter or entertainer. Over the past year I've had numerous informal conversations with colleagues working in other areas of music-making online about how exhausting working in this way is. Furthermore, when we look outside of creative workshops online, it seems like a high proportion of people working online have this universal feeling of this increasingly used phrase, zoom fatigue, and I wonder if this high energy, over exaggerated way of working is a contributing factor.

Furthermore, as a workshop leader I've found that my practice has to start from a place of acceptance- both to the situation and to the musical quality possible. It sounds simple but it's really important that the leader doesn't bemoan the situation-and rather focus on this exciting new way of working. In terms of music, zoom will always have a delay and that's okay- particularly in child led early years music, not everyone is going to be doing the same thing anyway.

To have the most child initiated sessions, it's important for the leader to truly have confidence to follow what they can see on the screen. At the beginning of this process I felt like I didn't want to be invasive or put anybody on the spot as I was probably a bit embarrassed myself. But by following what's on the screen and not being rigid with a script or plan, the sessions are so much more interactive, playful and child-led.

As previously mentioned however, I've said that as a leader I feel that my gestures and facial expressions needed to be bigger, so I have to reflect if I'm subconsciously expecting that from the participants too. In terms of engagement privilege, the honest reflection is that particularly at the beginning of this process, it was easier to follow a child who was making a large gesture, movement or clear verbal cue. However I think as I've grown in confidence with online sessions, I think this way of working can in fact provide children who don't engage in the stereotypical ways that we think of as engagement, to be more included (thus opening up the pathway for interactivity and then child-led initiation down the line).

This increased inclusion happens in a few ways. Firstly, regarding the Chamber Tots online sessions, the group number is smaller and there's much more time to go round everyone and more energy to look for every single cue; even if the camera is off I can include their name in the hello song and as the adult is (in most occasions) on the screen too, I can react to the interaction of the 'box' of participants, even if it's the child simply sitting on the parents lap. And as participants are in their own home, there's a certain amount of comfort and safety (there have been a few times when households haven't switched on their cameras at the start of the session, but then do). As I'll go on to discuss, in the Chamber Tots online sessions, parents and guardians are taking on a bigger and



more playful role within sessions which makes my job then easier to pick up child-initiated moments. And lastly, the props list has been super useful; even when children don't want to be on screen, they seem to be happy for their toy to be on screen which means as a leader I have something to react to.

Another quality that I found tricky at the beginning of moving the sessions online was that as a leader, I was more verbal. In my in-person sessions I've always tried to use as few words as possible, but working online, I feel that for clarity, at certain points in the session (e.g the start and the end), I have to use more words. Again, I think this is something that as a leader you just have to accept, and realise that if it enables you to hold the space to promote a meaningful session, then it's okay!

Finally, it's important for the workshop leader to remain flexible, curious and creative, and to create sessions with lots of spaces for exploration.

### **What does the Practical Set-Up include for leading workshops online?**

Regardless of the aim of the online session (e.g child-led, concert experience, sing songs) I've been surprised at the extensive and substantial consideration given towards the practical (and technical) set-up of leading early years online sessions. Furthermore, assuming that the aim of the session is to be child-led (in terms of Chamber Tots), I've been surprised at the correlation between how child-led a workshop can be with the large amount of time required for planning and set up, the technical and safe-guarding producer support during the session and then the time to develop content which encourages this pedagogy..

The individual practical set-up requirements to enable online Early Years sessions are extensive:

- Quiet space in your home to run these sessions
- Internet Access (and subsequently sufficient broadband speed)
- Computer and size of screen (enabling you to see more participants and spend less time scrolling between screens during sessions. I don't have a computer and therefore am using a tablet which means I don't have access to the same zoom settings or boxes on the screen as I would if I had a Mac Laptop.)
- Access to microphone
- Musical resources i.e instruments and props

Another important point for the practical set-up is the platform that the sessions are hosted on; each has its own opportunities and challenges. For instance, Zoom is great for seeing and hearing participants (thus allowing opportunity for the session to be child-led). However not every family has access to zoom, the number of participants is limited (an issue when it comes to financing the sessions) and musically, due to the way the platform has been programmed to pick up the speaking voice, it can be quite ineffective at picking up two sounds at once and certain instrument sounds such as the flute and clarinet. In contrast, a Facebook live is much more accessible for families (more families will have, and already use facebook) and they can access the session at a time that suits them best (through the video being posted onto the timeline). However, it's much more difficult to



communicate with participants (making a child-led session much more dependent on how the adults engage with the session) and you can't see or hear the participants.

When thinking about the practical set up for an Early Years session, there needs to be consideration given to participant recruitment. Being a leader for the Chamber Tots programme at Wigmore Hall, I am not involved in recruitment, the sessions are not run for profit and we have an existing audience due to the sessions having run for a couple of decades. This means we could keep numbers down to fourteen screens for the Chamber Tots Online sessions, ensuring we'd have lots of time to spend on the individual family units (and if you have a large screen, you can fit up to sixteen boxes on zoom). Furthermore, one can assume that because people had paid for the sessions, they were more likely to show up. In contrast with individual run sessions (such as Polly Ives' *Concerteenies* and Claire Hastings *Claire's Music Club*), these were likely to have larger group numbers, be free and be heard about through word-of-mouth or advertising on social media.

Lastly, in the Wigmore Hall Chamber Tots sessions, the programme manager was always there during the session. Practically, this meant as a workshop leader, I could focus solely on the content, the participants and reacting to what was going on (that I could view or hear in the online space). It meant I didn't have to worry about admitting people into the zoom platform, safeguarding responsibilities of the participants, or muting and unmuting people. This was one of the most important practical points that I felt allowed me to have as child-led a practice as possible. But also as a leader working in this new and anxiety provoking way, I felt incredibly supported by a trusted colleague throughout.

### **Preparation time and value of Freelancer practitioners**

In regards to preparation of content, the leaders I spoke to, spent more time preparing their online sessions than they had for their in-person sessions; this included possible scripting for particular moments, thinking about 'unmuting' moments and editing any pre-recorded material. To ensure that our sessions for Wigmore Hall could be as child-led as possible, we spent longer rehearsing with the musician that we would be working with during the session. Personally I found that I was keen to practice those improvisation moments along with songs that I have been singing for years- just so I could practice in this new zoom soundworld. When speaking with colleagues and friends working within other communities of music-making, this observation, like zoom fatigue, was universal. However I think an interesting point to explore in the future of online working, is that once this new way of working had been established within particular projects, and once all the necessary scaffolding is built within organisations (e.g equipment for leaders, recruitment of participants, expectations of audience, pay structure for freelancers, funding options for individual run projects), is there actually more preparation time required for online sessions compared to in-person sessions?

By the time we were leading participant paid Chamber Tots sessions online we had run two tester sessions, two feedback sessions, two team debrief sessions and approximately twelve hours of planning and rehearsal. It's important to note that all these hours were additional to the fact that Chamber Tots is an established programme (it's been running for twenty years), with three



experienced workshop leaders. Importantly, as freelancers, my colleagues and I were paid for our time. This luxury of time allowed us to truly reflect on what it was that we wanted to take from the pre-existing in-person sessions to the online sessions- ultimately for them to be as child-led and collaborative as possible.

In contrast, Early-Years sessions run online by freelancers were often unpaid. Although it's ultimately up to the workshop leaders as to the aim of the session ( i.e child-led, singing existing repertoire, gaining a concert experience, opportunity to be together etc.) one has to question how valued the workshop leader felt, often being unpaid for their expertise and time. And in the context of a global pandemic in which a large proportion of self-employed people were not financially supported (and those that were, only received 80% of their earnings over the past three years) combined with a government that questioned the viability of the arts, freelancers saw this trickle down effect to participants and audiences expecting online sessions for free; when there was a donation option, participants/ audiences either donated nothing, or very, very small amounts. As Polly Ives mentioned, *'I found myself having to do the lighting, sound, script-writing, producing... I can't compete with CBeebies that they could get for free... [there are] quite a lot of barriers.'*

I feel it's really important to mention payment, to closer explore the value that we place on the arts when it's online. People working in this sector, now more than ever before, are expected to do more and not necessarily get paid for it. Chatting to friends and other colleagues who are performers, saw lower fees being offered for gigs online (and I myself as a freelance presenter was being offered lower fees too for more performance based work). This assumption that you were at home and have nothing to do anyway was at times palpable. However one has to question whether this is because of actually valuing working online less, or simply an extension of the age old myth of purely being a musician for the love of it and the subsequent low value we place on the arts in this country (regardless of the fact that the arts contributes £8.5 billion pounds to the UK Economy (according to Arts Council England website)). In an industry where people working for free is regularly traded for exposure and possible opportunity, is working for less or nothing online an extension of the low value we've always placed on the arts, or a diminishing value led by a government who questions our viability whilst encouraging us all to retrain?

### **What do you see as the benefits of online sessions?**

During the course of the pandemic, I have found there to be many benefits to online Early-Years workshops. Firstly, from a personal perspective, a huge benefit has been the sense of achievement both at learning new skills to enable workshops to go online, but also in finding a creative solution in the midst of a global pandemic. As Esther Sheriden, a fellow Chamber Tots leader says,

*One of the benefits is that you do think more creatively- not less; both in a creative output way, but in a how-are-we-going-to-get-round-this-problem way too. What do we need to put into place to solve this issue? [This experience] reinforces that creative people are really*



*important- it's not just about the right answer...[Our] Whole livelihood has potentially become unviable but we're making it viable by exploring all these different options.*

However, although a completely personal point, I have to acknowledge that this comes from a place of job privilege- before the pandemic hit I had strong, existing relationships with established venues, charities and programmes that enabled me as a freelancer to continue working during a pandemic when most of my colleagues were either not working or were doing jobs outside of the sector.

As a workshop leader, these Wigmore Hall sessions were one of the few opportunities during the pandemic that I got to connect, communicate and lead workshops with various families. From the rehearsal and development prospective, as a team we saved countless hours commuting (and money), and actually over the course of the past ten months we feel a great sense of community with each other, and the whole experience has been incredibly supportive.

A big benefit for the families taking part in online sessions is that they don't need to travel or think about other such logistics to enable them to be part of a session. Whether it was because they were more comfortable in their own spaces, or less worried about how their child would engage with an online session (it's much easier to turn off a camera, than gathering everything up to leave an in-person session which you've travelled an hour to get to) we have found at Chamber Tots Online that adults are much more playful and happy to join in than in in-person sessions. For me, an adult joining in in a playful way looks like taking the lead from the child, as well as them experiencing the session for themselves too; it can look like lots of movement, 'big' facial gestures and like teamwork (with the child) rather than a more traditional adult/child dynamic, but it can also look like the adult and child sitting next to each other on the sofa having a cuddle/ laugh about something together.

I think having more playful adults in online sessions is important to note in terms of child-led practice as even if the child's individual actions weren't affecting the overall session, it was affecting what was going on in their space, and with the knowledge that their child was on mute, the guardian tended to be much more free and inhibited in their response. Because the workshop leader is in a different space, it's up to the adult to affirm what's going on by modelling what the leader is encouraging everyone to do.

It's important to briefly note however that although some adults will thrive with this additional role, for some it may discourage them as the main aim of in-person sessions is to get out the house, interact with others and allow someone else to take control for a while. It's interesting that in Chamber Tots we're starting to have conversations about how we can model in-person sessions, so we have the same playfulness from the adults that we see in online sessions. And I wonder if this question regarding how an adult interacts with the session stems from thinking about what the sole aim of a session is. Therefore, moving forward, cultural institutions to be truly accessible, should have a variety of engagement options that cater to different needs for families (e.g concerts, community spaces, sessions, lessons that provide passive and interactive ways to connect with activities).



Greater levels of adult interaction was something that Rachel Swanick, a music therapist who leads Museo Babies at Manchester Museum noticed too, and noted that *'having the distance can prove less intrusive for some'*. Furthermore, Rachel raised a really interesting point about the boundary of sessions being held at a cultural venue too,

*The boundary of getting to a cultural venue is huge- is it inverted snobbery? Is it a bit patronising? I don't know what it comes across as, but it's definitely in the room [in in-person sessions], whatever it is.*

By having sessions online, one is removing this weight of expectations and beliefs that naturally surround a cultural institution; this can blur boundaries and actually encourage the session to start from a more equal place, and have focus on the participants rather than the venue. Online sessions help to break that initial barrier of attending a new session- whether it be a social, economic or a geographical barrier- and could actually be used from an audience development perspective. When one stops to think about how difficult, and how many factors there are at play for someone to bring a child to an in-person session, it's remarkable to think that it took a global pandemic, to have the time to reflect and create a practice that is more accessible to all.

In non- Early Years workshops that I've been leading online, I've noticed a real difference in retaining participants for the duration of the project. This is irrelevant in terms of Chambers Tots as they are one off sessions, but Rachel Swanick has noticed a difference in her early-years online workshops which work with parents experiencing or are at risk of postnatal depression and/or anxiety.

*When we had the session in the museum we'd have six to eight participants, then at the end [of the six weeks] about three. With online, we had eight participants register, and we've retained seven.*

I'd love to do some more research on this and explore this finding as I'm sure there are many reasons aside from it's comforting to know that you can switch off the camera and still be involved, as well as it being an easier and cheaper time commitment.

Furthermore, we have found that at Chamber Tots we no longer have a solely London-based participant group. And this has been a recurrent theme amongst various online sessions-a huge benefit of online practice has been the ability to connect with families that are either geographically isolated, or not in close proximity to the venue (this is one of the reasons Claire Hastings runs her Claire's Music Club on Facebook- so that her audience in America and Australia can watch at a time that suits them). This point leads on to the impact that the global pandemic has had on climate change- and how moving forward, online sessions might be an essential way of connecting to ensure the carbon footprint on our world is reduced.



All these benefits help to create a space where child-led sessions can happen, communities can be brought together and that sense of togetherness can be achieved. However there are certain downfalls to online sessions which must be considered too.

One of the biggest difficulties about having sessions online is there not being a 'tea and biscuit', or 'soft-start' equivalent time before and/ or after; the informal moments that can influence a workshop, start friendships and ultimately the moment that make these sessions human. It's really difficult to create this equivalent moment online, and due to another problem of working online, zoom fatigue, participants (and leaders!) are less likely to stay online for an informal chat. Furthermore, the lack of physical journey time to and from the session (often a key bonding time for the participant unit) is no longer there. Everything is instead instant, and the opportunity to develop patience for the child is minimised- as Rachel Swanick said children are now learning, *'If I open the laptop or get the phone then a lady will sing for me...'*.

Although not having to commute has its benefits in terms of time and money for workshop leaders, one has to question how sustainable full-time freelance workshop leading at home is; more than ever before I find it extremely difficult to differentiate between my job and my personal life, and in regards to early years sessions, my space at home quickly becomes filled with props, instruments and various sets that I use in my session. I also find it more difficult to have an effective debrief moment, as I'm so happily exhausted by the session, that I can't switch to the part of my brain that would allow for a constructive reflection. It's also a very strange (and sometimes a disconcerting feeling) to leave the zoom meeting and then just be by yourself in your home.

Reflecting specifically on the difficulties of zoom as a platform, there are very large limitations on both the sound quality of instruments, and the opportunity to make music together. This at times can be hugely frustrating, but ironically for a music session, I don't think this is one of the most impactful difficulties. There's something about the music still being performed live and therefore having the energy and nuances of a live sharing, that makes the musical experience still valuable. And apart from the inability to sing unmuted altogether (which as we know is a hugely beneficial activity for physical and mental health) we still can make and experience music together.

A difficulty that we must be mindful of, particularly when working in Early-Years, is screen-time. As an adult I know that I feel more anxious and restless the more time I spend on a screen. Although I'm assuming that too much screen time is indeed a bad thing for a child. During my conversation with Rachel, she told me about one of her observations in her sessions specifically with adopted children (who are not necessarily 0-5 years of age),

*As a therapist, parents want to speak about screen time. [The] child will use the screen as a complete block- when they come off, they're back where they were- they haven't dealt with it- compared to a child with 'normal' development.*



I think it would be really interesting to research further the impact of screen time in relation to the emotional development of children, looking specifically in terms of learning to manage emotions. Furthermore, in terms of physical development, looking into how eye scanning, and learning to read and write is affected.

During my conversation with Claire Hastings, she mentioned a difficulty for the workshop leader that I hadn't thought about, *'...because everyone's work is online it's really easy to compare yourself to others. I've not looked at other workshops- it's difficult not to let that [those workshops] impact you and your mental health.'* In this day and age when we know that social media comes with certain health risks, something I think that would be interesting to look into further, is the effect on the workshop leader and/ or musician, of their work being online for everyone to see, and therefore judge. The fact that these sessions are permanently there, is something that is completely new and doesn't allow for the nuisance and in-the-moment quality that is so special about creative arts workshops. Although people can't view the Chamber Tots workshops, some have been recorded, and as a workshop leader I do feel anxious that someone is going to see my work and think I'm not very good. Although I haven't done much pre-recorded work for early years, I have for other areas of my work, and I have found that this has created a huge amount of anxiety and imposter syndrome.

Lastly, I think one of the difficulties that has to be considered when working online, is digital poverty, both in terms of data and WiFi, and having the technology to participate in the sessions. Arts Organisations musn't assume that everyone has access to these things, and one of the steps moving forward, especially when working with families from a lower socio-economic background, must be to provide the tools to ensure everyone can take part.



## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I believe online early years sessions absolutely can be child-led. These musical experiences can be an opportunity for creativity, playfulness, community and child initiated music-making. Working this way online can be a meaningful experience for everyone involved and I think in terms of the numerous benefits I've explored, it's important that moving forward, arts organisations respond to our changing arts landscape and seek to make their institutions truly more accessible for all.

The practical strategies that I've identified (including the importance of improvisation, incorporating everyday objects relevant to children, having lots of movement and time to explore by themselves) are important for working online in the future, but they are also important for when we do return to in-person practice. We have to use the learnings from the past year to inform future activity and not see working online and in-person as something completely different, but rather two ways of working that can really inform and intertwine with each other.

It must be noted that there are many limitations to my report- I've spoken with a tiny percentage of workshop leaders, and observed very few sessions within this sector. I am aware that my report is mostly my reflections- but I feel very lucky to have had the time and support from Creative Futures to actually stop and reflect on what has happened over the past year. It's greatly impacted my practice- I feel confident in my findings and these influence the content of my Early Years workshops and training.

As a freelancer, opportunities like this, alongside attending talks for free (the speaker was paid by the organisation instead of by ticket sales) and training that I was paid for, have all really impacted my practice. A talk that greatly stood out was Nate Holder's Decolonising Music in Early Years; it was a fantastic opportunity to not only reflect on the content of my workshops but also to think about the systematic racism that is embedded in music education and often overlooked in regards to Early Years. Having the time to reflect, to learn and be supported by others in this sector is an essential part of being a freelancer with an ever evolving practice. These opportunities help to build confidence for freelancers, but they need to be paid, otherwise the value the freelancer feels quickly diminishes. If organisations are wanting to work with thoughtful, creative and happy individuals, they need to invest in them, which of course feeds into the bigger question, and problem, of funding and the value we place in the arts and our artists.

During the process of writing this report, I have been surprised at how readily I ended up reflecting on the much wider issues within the arts sector, in addition to exploring my original questions. In general, I feel that moving forward from this Pandemic, the arts sector need to not return to how it has always been, but instead approach the future with a more blended array of activity. We know now that we can reach audiences that are geographically far away, and we also know that for some, working or connecting online is a much easier way of participating in projects; arts organisations need to respond to this and actively commit to recruiting participants for online specific activity. A more blended approach would not only reflect the world that we are living in, but provide yet



another opportunity for families to make music together, alongside activities such as in-person sessions, concerts for children and music in Early Years settings.

This shift to a more diverse output of workshops will affect my personal and professional life- although I cannot foresee a future where I'd be happy to work full-time online, I can imagine my workshop leader practice being both online and in-person; the two informing and enlightening the other. Although in regards to meetings- I hope these remain online for evermore!

Furthermore, when I was talking with Esther Sheridan, we explored this idea of online Early Years sessions being the equivalent of planting seeds- the venue is not a boundary and it doesn't matter where you are- the focus is on being together and creating moments where children can initiate the music-making. Then once this relationship has been built, if the family unit does visit a session at the venue, or the ensemble travels to where the participants are, it means that initial meeting is going to be even more meaningful as relationships and trust have already been built. Esther went on to say,

*Nobody is good at change- as humans we need something catastrophic to happen to question what are the good things about what we do, what's at the heart of what we do, and what do we want to portray?*

At the beginning of this experience of working online I was reluctant to explore the possibility of it. However, now I feel very hopeful that this way of working will encourage arts venues and ensembles to connect with even more families than before, ensuring that more children (and their guardians) have access to the magic of making music.