creative futures

Music at Heart

Report 2024-25

BACKGROUND

Music at Heart is a participatory singing group for mothers with perinatal mental health issues and their babies. Weekly sessions are facilitated by two music practitioners in a community setting, with participants referred from NHS perinatal teams at St Mary's Hospital, with whom we have worked since our pilot project in 2022.

Our approach is rooted in research led by Daisy Fancourt and Rosie Perkins (2018), where analysis was carried out on a group of mothers with post-natal depression, some of whom took part in singing workshops and some of whom took part in play workshops. The findings suggest that, especially for mothers with more severe post-natal depression, the singing activity significantly accelerated a reduction in symptoms.



The group is complementary to other therapies that the participating mothers may be taking part in:

"It provides an extra touch point in my week. For example, if I haven't been able to see G (therapist), I still have another place to come which has been great."



ABOUT MUSIC AT HEART

A calm atmosphere and a feeling of taking some time away from the pressure of daily life with a small baby is essential. Mothers arrive in a comfortable room, with cushions, rugs and instrument laid out in a circle, and a sofa and breastfeeding chair available for anyone that needs them. There is a 'soft start' as we play some gentle live music on tuned percussion and interact with the babies as they arrive, allowing the mothers to have some peaceful time to settle. Babies often become very calm in the space, particularly when the music starts, and they often enjoy seeing other babies.

We sing simple songs, add harmonies, and over time begin to bring in suggestions of songs from mothers' own backgrounds or interests and, with our support, create new songs together, personalised to the mothers and their babies.
We prioritise time for counted breathing, calming the vagus nerve and allowing the women some space to prioritise themselves even while their babies are there too.

"It's such a great motivation to come with the baby, leave the house – it's something to look forward to."

THE SONGS

They are not nursery rhymes, but rather lullabies and anthems from all over the world which celebrate mothers, women or any aspect of life we feel inspired by.

The repetitive, simple nature of many of the songs is very important – it allows the women to join in easily and creates a calming, meditative atmosphere. However, just because they are simple, it does not mean the songs are not beautiful. We add harmonies, canons and instruments to create a rich musical experience.

We've also encouraged mothers to help choose the repertoire. As they grow in confidence, some mothers have suggested songs they think the group would enjoy, and some have even led the singing of the new songs themselves – perhaps a song from their home culture or a song which makes them feel safe which they want to share.

"The songs are meaningful, some emotional, some fun, but all the songs are so good"

CREATIVE WORK

When appropriate, we incorporate creative songwriting activities.
We might begin by having mothers suggest key words for existing songs. For example, we often start with a song to welcome the babies, which allows the women to choose an adjective to describe how their baby is that day, and for everyone to sing to each baby. We might write about what is on the horizon for the babies (teeth, walking, eating) or ideas of a gift they might give to themselves as a mother right now (which frequently results in wonderful array of ideas including holidays, cocktails, positivity, patience and of course rest).

Starting these activities in a structured way with small contributions often opens up broader conversations. Giving mothers the space to discuss the stories and meanings behind their baby's names led to one of the most meaningful sessions we encountered. Mother-guided conversations, such as discussing expected experiences during pregnancy led to participants exploring topics such as personal space and identity.

PILLARS OF PRACTICE

Inclusive Participation

Music at Heart is intended as a safe space where any form of participation in music can be a healing one, whether singing, listening, or simply being.

> *"I found it nice to hear that any form of participation is completely okay. Penny emphasised that. You can sit, nurse or do anything you want. That was reassuring for me. I am always anxious about the schedule of the baby, so it was nice to know that it was free to do whatever."*

Safety and familiarity

We repeat some songs weekly for familiarity and grounding. The repetitive nature of the songs themselves also provides security. From that secure base, mothers often feel empowered to add their creative ideas to the music-making themselves.

Responsive attunement

We respond to the needs of the mothers and babies in the moment, perhaps changing the type of song, adding a layer of challenge, or slowing the pace for example.

If a baby is very active, wriggly and becoming distressed, we might take that cue to do more active songs where the mothers can stand and rock their babies. (This also allows the mother of the distressed baby to feel calmer, as she need not worry about her baby 'disrupting' anything). If mothers are feeling tired and the amount of singing is low, we might offer a song as a gift to the mothers to just rest and listen to.

'Good Enough'

We celebrate the power of the maternal voice above all else. This means valuing the women's diverse lived experiences of and perspectives on motherhood, as well as celebrating the mothers' own voices as most important for singing to their babies.

The music-making is more of an informal jam session, which relaxes any pre-conceived ideas about how "singing" is a performance of a song, rather than a therapeutic group process.

CONSIDERATIONS

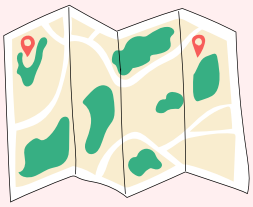
Recruitment

Recruiting enough participants can be a challenge. If numbers are too low in a session it can feel exposing, make the mother feel vulnerable and the concentrated attention may feel too intense.

100% of mothers who attended, attended at least a further two sessions - the challenge for us has been the initial attendance.

Barriers to attendance: venue





It is vital that sessions are held in welcoming spaces. Location and transport can present challenges:
"*Where it requires public transport I did have difficulties initially. I felt anxiety with the baby and had to get used to pram on the bus.*"

Venues need easy physical access, simple to find entrances, and manned reception desks. Maps and pictures of the exterior can be helpful.

Barriers to attendance: expectations

Some mothers told us they were initially worried about feeling out of place or awkward, about their baby being settled enough for the group, or concerns about what would be asked of them.

For some sessions we have made information sheets and flyers with photos and names the team. Music can have a lot of associations, such as that one has to be talented, 'you're born with it', or that it involves 'performing'. We are hoping to explore further ways to communicate with mothers, such as videos, before they attend their first session to dispel some of these myths.

Considerations for practice



Balancing the needs of everyone in the group can be challenging. The practitioners noted in their reflections:

‘”Z loves to sing and particularly enjoyed the solo line, but I noticed that F became more withdrawn after this. We learnt the chorus line so we could all sing it together, but I don’t think this song works particularly well in our context, as it is better suited to confident singers.”

It is also necessary to integrate new members with the long-standing, those with babies of different ages, and in the process of songwriting and discussion to blend participants’ different approaches to parenting. As in any group situation, there is also the potential for participants to compare themselves to each other, as when one mother commented on how well dressed another was in comparison to herself.

We are mindful to use natural voices so as not to intimidate the mothers or set a ‘performance’ standard, though on one occasion a mother did comment that a particular song felt like a bit of a performance, and that she preferred the more communal and low-key singing.

OUTCOMES

We asked participants mothers to anonymously rate their agreement, from 0 to 5 (where 5 is strongly agree)

5 The musicians made me feel at ease and encouraged participation

4.9 The group felt like a safe space where I could be myself

4.3 The group offered a space to meet and share with other mothers

5 I felt more relaxed by the end of the session

We found that the outcomes identified through our evaluation fit the areas identified in Perkins et al.'s (2020) meta-ethnography on how participatory music engagement supports mental well-being:

- **Managing and expressing emotions**
- **Facilitating self-development**
- **Providing respite**
- **Facilitating connections**



Managing and expressing emotions



Many of the participating mothers described the sessions as relaxing.

Others reflected: "*it connects me with my emotions*", "*it helped me feel ok*", or "*I found it very therapeutic*".

The lyrics can be important in some of the songs, for example those that reference childbirth, motherhood or the babies. Some songs can also spark conversations about babies/motherhood (see process diary). Some can be metaphorical ('There's a River, Spring is Coming Soon'). Others may just have words or syllables that function as sounds. We think this range offers reflection of mother's experience, but also a way to allow them to interpret their own subjective experiences in a less literal way, and perhaps to channel emotions that can't be put into words.

"It felt like warmth and comfort".

Facilitating self-development



The group gives mothers a sense of purpose and motivation to get out of the house. Hospital staff described how some mothers did not go to many other groups and going to the music group, which was something they enjoyed, was a good start.

"It's worth leaving the house for (nothing makes me leave the house!)"

Singing and songwriting offers mothers the chance to experience a sense of achievement. Mothers comment on how beautiful the songs and harmonies sound, how they have achieved rounds or parts, and how they feel empowered by the song lyrics. In our safe space, mothers have the chance to develop positive experiences of risk-taking and making mistakes. Songs that describe and celebrate motherhood can also be important. As one mother commented:

"It makes you feel a sense of pride and importance that can often get lost in the day to day of motherhood, especially at the beginning"

Sessions also provide a space where the women can develop their sense of identity as a mother. They take pleasure in seeing their baby enjoy themselves, for example one mother became quite emotional seeing her baby interact with another baby. This in turn increases their pride in their parenting.

"I would say the sessions have helped me feel like I've become a mum."

"It's really helped calm me down and I use the song which I learnt through the sessions, to help me focus on the fact that I am a mother doing the best I can, for myself and my baby."

Providing respite



Mothers told us how the sessions offer a type of respite.

Practitioners described how one mother "*closed her eyes in deep immersion, radiating happiness*". Another mother described how "*it takes me somewhere else*".

The sessions not only offer respite, but also highlight to the mothers how much that respite is needed, often to their surprise. Against a backdrop where the mother's needs can often be made invisible next to the baby's, one mother commented: "*I particularly appreciate the emphasis on mother and baby, instead of just baby.*" Another commented in one session that she felt emotional and thought it was because "*mums seldom have a moment to acknowledge themselves*".

"I did not realise how useful the space would be, or how needed it was".

Mothers connected their ability to relax, connect with or express emotions, or experience a sense of respite in the sessions with the pillars of practice, whereby the group is a safe and familiar space, where they can participate in the way that is right for them, and where there they can be accepted 'as they are'.

"I could relax because there no expectation of me in the space."

Facilitating connections



Mothers commented that they enjoyed feeling 'part of something' and that the group felt like a community.

"I love building harmonies with the lovely facilitators"

As all the participants are referred from the perinatal team, there is a sense that, despite any other differences, they are all 'in the same boat' somehow. Mothers commented that they enjoyed spending time with "*other mums on the same journey*" or "*mums with similar experiences*".

Over time, mothers opened up about traumatic births, challenges with feeding and sleeping, returning to work, and other difficulties they had faced. Sometimes the group were able to offer some advice, reassurance or solidarity. For example, when one mother was crying during a session, another waited for her to walk home together. As mothers develop in confidence they also often offer a warm welcome to new members of the group.

The group can facilitate connections outside the sessions. Some mothers have arranged to go to drop-ins and other places together, and some have stayed in contact after leaving the group.

"I don't think I would ever go to the children's centre if it wasn't for the music group. So it helped me to join the other groups, which was really nice."

The musical space can also offer an opportunity for connection between mother and baby. Personalising songs with babies' names, their feelings and personalities, supports the development of mind-mindedness.

The mothers also enjoy the social benefits for the babies, with many commenting that it is good their little ones get to see and interact with other babies.

"My baby girl is so happy and confident here""

NEXT STEPS

"I just wish there were more sessions!"

We hope to be able to continue to offer these sessions to mothers; many expressed that they would like to have multiple sessions per week.

Some also commented that they would like to be able to continue to attend after being discharged by the perinatal team. Creative Futures offers a 'musical care pathway', including 'Nurture Groups' which are smaller music groups with a more consistent membership, and our open drop-ins which are larger (more information at https://www.creativefuturesuk.com/community-families). Some mothers, as georgraphically appropriate, have continued through this pathway and we hope to continue to develop this pathway to be able to provide care for more mothers.

A number of mothers also reflected on how much they would have enjoyed and benefitted from these sessions while they were in Mother and Baby Units, so there may be potential to expand the musical pathway in this way.

"It's such a relaxed environment, really positive, friendly, welcoming, and inclusive."

REFERENCES

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Music at Heart

"Great musicians and coordinator team, friendly team make us feel that we are in our home (and heart)"

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