

# More than potato prints

making the most of the arts in early years settings



Sure Start children's centres are brimful with opportunity. They exist to offer services and information for children under five years old and their families, with activities delivered by teams of professionals across a range of specialist areas. The Government is committed to establishing a Sure Start children's centre within every community by 2010. The centres are a vital part of the national 10 year childcare strategy, which aims to offer the best possible start in life for very young children, whilst supporting their parents to achieve this.

Centres across the West Midlands have developed a strong arts-based focus for their childcare activities. This document features a number of examples which illustrate the range of what is possible. The Reggio Emilia concept of exploring creativity to the full offers underlying inspiration for some of these. It is founded in the belief that a child who is driven by curiosity and imagination, who is eager to interact with and contribute to the world, who listens and is listened to, and who is valued, will go on to have the best chance of realising their potential in life.

Some settings place such value upon the arts as an integrated element of their activities that they work on a regular basis with specialist staff. St Thomas Children's Centre in Birmingham has developed a particularly wide range of arts based activity, while Allen's Croft Children's Centre in the Kings Heath area of the city has a part-time artist in residence on the staff team. The community arts specialists at B arts have developed a long-term relationship with Sure Start Newcastle, and many other such partnerships exist.

A number of projects have worked in collaboration with individual freelance artists, whose skills encompass music, storytelling, sculpture, mixed media, construction work and ceramics, to name but a few. The benefits are numerous and include improved family cohesion, increased self belief and self confidence for parents, and accelerated social and communication skills for children.

Partnership with Sure Start helps to ensure that the arts are central to family life from the earliest stages, and that they are able to reach to the heart of some of this country's most deprived communities.



Image: Children with pottery wheel. *"My children can be free and explore at the art sessions whereas at home they can't."* Project: Next Steps, Sure Start Blakenall.  
Photographer: Jonathan Lee

# Next Steps

## Sure Start Blakenall, Walsall

### **Aims**

To encourage creative play, and the development of activities focusing on interaction between parents, carers and their children.

### **About the project**

*Next Steps* was inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach which places importance on how children learn. The process of creation is all-important, stimulating children to express themselves. Parents played a vital role in the Blakenall project in the selection of artists, planning activities and documenting the children's work, as well as participating with their children in the creative sessions.

Loris Malaguzzi pioneered the introduction of creative and experimental ways of working with young children in the small town of Reggio Emilia in a school in northern Italy some 50 years ago. Today, Reggio educators the world over believe in a child with unlimited potential, eager to interact with and contribute to the world, and driven by curiosity and imagination.

Sally Harper, the lead artist for this project, received training in the Reggio approach to education and this Sure Start project is founded on the Reggio philosophy. Sally developed activities in collaboration with parents and fellow artists Jon Williams and Ruth Spaak.

The sessions with parents and children were extremely popular. Families made exciting pieces of work using a wide range of

media, and these were exhibited first at the New Art Gallery, Walsall, then at other Sure Start settings including Blakenall itself until December 2006. The exhibition is now on permanent show at the Blakenall centre.

The idea for the exhibition came from the parents and children involved, following a visit to see the New Art Gallery's Discovery Gallery.

### *Growing and developing*

Ruth Spaak worked with Zain for a long period, helping him to cut the foam and to tie the cable ties in loops. At first he found it quite difficult, but after some help he was able to use his new found skills to create a large collage.

### *Emotional wellbeing*

Archie discovered he could see himself on the television. He was mesmerised by every movement. After a while he went to find his mum to communicate what he had discovered.

### *Making connections*

Jon Williams demonstrated how he had made his pots on the wheel. The children and parents watched and then each had a go in turn. Solomon loved the process and was able to control the clay on the wheel to make his pot.

### *Sense of belonging*

Sophie, J'Varn and Zain cooperated together, taking it in turns to add different objects to the screen of the overhead projector. In turn they looked at the shadows cast on the fabric screen.

#### **Outcomes from the project included:**

- experience of working with innovative and imaginative professional artists
- families were involved in an exploration of new activities, materials and experiences, creating opportunities for everyone to learn and explore together
- imagination and creativity were stimulated
- social, language (verbal and non verbal) and sensory skills were developed
- confidence of children, parents and carers increased
- a sense of pride was created and strengthened families within the community

#### **Key facts**

##### **Project partners:**

New Art Gallery, Walsall

##### **Artists:**

Sally Harper, community artist working with light and shadow

Jon Williams, ceramicist

Ruth Spaak, glass, mixed media and textile artist

Jonathan Lee, project photographer

##### **Funding:**

Arts Council England, West Midlands

Sure Start Blakenall

New Art Gallery, Walsall

##### **Budget:**

£22,598

##### **Timescale:**

Creative project: January-July 2006,  
comprising 90 half-day sessions

Touring exhibition: July-December 2006

##### **Number of participants:**

Approximately 80-100 parents and children

##### **Contact for further information:**

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# Fathers Make Music

St Thomas Children's Centre, Attwood Green, Birmingham

## Aims

To engage with fathers through an accessible arts-based project and encourage them to become more involved with their child's development and care. The project aimed to dispel the notion that this is exclusively the role of female carers.

## About the project

The St Thomas Children's Centre is committed to raising awareness of the male parent or carer role model in family childcare and development, and providing support and encouragement.

The difficulty of recruiting men into support groups has been well documented nationally. This children's centre feels it is vital to support fathers, grandfathers and male carers who take on the role of looking after young children as part of everyday life. It strives to change the perception that activities are only geared towards mothers and their children. With the specific aim of encouraging more men to get involved in activities and share creative experiences with their young children, the centre offered fathers and their children the opportunity to attend a variety of music workshops.

The *Fathers Make Music* project enabled a wide range of families to access and enjoy many different styles of music. The skills of the musicians were essential in capturing the enthusiasm of the participants by responding to people's different needs and

adapting sessions accordingly. The sessions created a real sense of community, reflecting the cultural diversity of the catchment of this children's centre location. New families coming into the centre for the first time were attracted, and then went on to access further support.

To ensure that the sessions were beneficial and that project aims were met, interviews and evaluation summaries were conducted at the end of each workshop with all participants, including children's centre staff.

*"The Fathers Make Music group encourages families to take part and work as one unit. It supports and helps to develop speech interaction and social skills, which is good grounding for development of language. I feel this has really helped some of the families who have taken part."* Jo Culley, Senior Family Worker

What did you and your child like about the event?

*"Louie liked roaring like a lion and I liked everything. The action song was easy to remember and join in."*

How could we make the day better?

*"Can't think of anything"* Justin Mills, father

*"Peter and Hayden have really enjoyed the music and it has helped Max with socialising and it has even helped Christina with her speech delay and shyness"* Smith family

*"It's a relaxed atmosphere. I don't like to keep it too structured but it has to be vibrant enough to retain their interest. These sessions aren't about producing an end performance or result, it's about the experience the families get out of it."*

Andy Mason, African drumming expert and father

**Outcomes from the project included:**

- fathers fully engaging in parenting interaction with their children
- development of socialising and speech skills for children
- increased confidence and independence for children
- engagement with other families and creation of a sense of community
- development of a love and knowledge of a diverse range of music and dance
- the creative environment encouraged bonding and communication with families, developing their confidence and enjoyment of being together
- a better understanding for centre staff of how the entire family unit operates together

**Key facts**

**Project partners:**

Symphony Hall, Birmingham (Andy Vine)

**Artists:**

Andy Mason, African drummer

Jag Kumar, Bhangra expert

ACE Music Company, African drumming and dance

Rebecca Ledgard, musician and songwriter

**Funding:**

Youth Music's Soundfutures programme

**Budget:**

£12,262

**Timescale:**

April 2006-March 2007

**Number of participants:**

An average of 11 parents with 15 children attending each Saturday session

**Contact for further information:**

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# Changes

## Allen's Croft Children's Centre, Kings Heath, Birmingham

### Aims

To explore themes around transition, ownership and development. The project aimed to give support to children, their families and staff in establishing a newly built centre as their own, and to provide a creative forum for expressing feelings about the transition. The new centre is due to open in 2008.

### About the project

Allen's Croft Children's Centre has a permanent artist in residence, Jess Tomlinson, who works at the centre for two and a half days each week as part of the centre's team. Her role is to work with children's visual language, to support both staff and children with skills, to look at and think objectively about the centre's work, and to help staff think about the layers of meaning in children's work.

Whilst the centre's own premises were being rebuilt, they moved to temporary accommodation. Workers noticed that this was accompanied by a change in the children's play, which moved away from risk-taking, construction-based work, towards play which was more sensory and simplistic. Workers interpreted this change as a reaction to the move, which threatened the children's sense of safety and limited their desire to take risks in play.

The team aimed to create activities which would help the children establish the transitional building as their own, and to support them during this period of change.

The changes taking place raised questions, and stimulated hopes and fears for the future. The *Changes* project was a creative consultation involving arts workshops, informal discussion, one to one interviews, a photographic record, and finally an exhibition of artwork and a celebration day. An illustrated report detailing the consultation's findings was produced.

Three artists worked on the consultation. They reflected on the centre's service as a whole and gathered the perspectives of all those involved in the centre. Creative methods were used to ensure high levels of involvement, to provide different means of expression and to create something that could remind the community of their feelings about the transition. All three artists also ran arts workshops reflecting on the centre's past, present and future, picking up themes related to feelings about the transition. Song writing, storytelling and visual arts all contributed to these reflections.

Written and spoken information was collated into the consultants' report, together with a poem by centre users and staff (the *Changes* poem). Artwork made by families, children and staff, and photos taken by the children and artist in residence Jess Tomlinson were used to create a series of images that illustrated themes from the consultation. These have been turned into photographic collages, and remain at the centre as a reminder of the feelings and hopes of the community during the ongoing transitional period.



Three other arts based projects have also become part of the ongoing work of the centre, involving the artist in residence in their delivery:

- An outdoor environment project, helping the children establish a sense of ownership over a piece of land that will be the only constant whilst the structural work is in progress. The activities involve sculpture, photography and mark making.
- A transition project linking and establishing relationships between the under three's unit, the pre-school group and the local primary school's reception class. A variety of artforms, reflection and discussion create links between the three settings by working with common themes in the children's imaginative play.
- A project working in the new transitional indoor environment to ensure that it meets the children's need for a sense of safety, while offering opportunities for risk taking, self expression and imaginative play. The project has developed around the concept of moving and looked at the changes going on in a once familiar environment. This is explored through the children's play, allowing time to express feelings and reflect on *moving* and *change*.

### **Outcomes from the project included:**

- staff gaining practical experience of how the arts can be used as an expressive language
- a heightened awareness for staff of children's feelings means they work in greater depth to develop responses and reassure children as changes of all kinds occur
- work being extended to offer support as children approach the move from the nursery environment to Key Stage 1
- continuing opportunities created for children and families to express thoughts and feelings about the new site
- children's play returned to being more in depth and focused as their sense of security returned
- a reminder of the core values of Allen's Croft and the qualities that make it so highly valued by the community

### **Key facts**

#### **Artists:**

Jess Tomlinson, visual artist, artist in residence

Rachel Gartside, dramatist  
(email: rachel.gartside@blueyonder.co.uk)

Sue Buntin, early years music specialist  
(email: suebuntin@hotmail.com)

#### **Funding:**

Excellence in Cities programme  
Sure Start Children's Centres

#### **Budget:**

£3,650

#### **Timescale:**

December 2005-March 2006

#### **Number of participants:**

52 pre-school children

28 staff

15 stay and play families

3 parent governors

#### **Contact for further information:**

Jess Tomlinson

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# How does it make you feel?

Hollybush Family Centre, Hereford

Honey Bees, Leominster

The HOPE Centre, Bromyard

Hunderton Neighbourhood Nursery

## Aims

To bring artists into an early years setting to work with pre-school children with a focus on creative processes rather than an end product.

To empower Sure Start staff in their work with children through a project that will develop the child's independent thinking skills using the creative potential of the environment.

## Hollybush Family Centre - Hereford

Staff were keen to encourage activity in an outdoor area. There was also a strong desire to allow a positive interaction between children and parents or carers.

The main activity was the construction of a tepee in the outside area using coppiced wood and calico fabric as a cover, which was decorated by families.

## Honey Bees - Leominster

The children worked with a collection of brightly coloured and textured vintage buttons, developing their imaginative skills. The children were invited to explore the buttons and to think about who might wear each button and what kind of clothing it could have come from. Ideas for 'button wearers' included a pet dog, a mummy, a clown and a giant.

## The HOPE Centre, Bromyard

Children visited Warren Wood, a part of Bromyard Downs, to investigate the idea of journeys and mapping. On the walk, children were asked to gather natural materials to take back to use later. Halfway through the walk, a series of steep pathways made a natural area for play and adventure, and the children rolled tennis balls down the pathways.

Back at the centre, everyone made clay balls and pressed the objects they had gathered in the wood into the clay. They also made an action painting with balls of clay dipped in paint which they rolled onto large sheets of paper.

## Hunderton Neighbourhood Nursery

The nursery is located on the southern edge of the city of Hereford. The project looked at aspects of city and countryside.

Children talked about images of Hereford's buildings, then used those ideas to create models using recycled materials.

Outside the playroom, with paper wrapped around tree trunks, children used graphite and charcoal on the paper to bring up the texture of the tree beneath.

They pressed clay onto various surfaces and onto the ground, picking up amazing textures with seeds, stones and earth.



Image: Herefordshire How does it make you feel? Photographer: Anna Falcini

### **Outcomes from the project included:**

- freedom to enjoy a creative activity without time constraints
- ability to let the activity develop through the child
- development of ideas around individual creation
- development of thought processes
- exploring the tactile experience of different materials
- ownership

### **Key facts**

#### **Project partners:**

Herefordshire Council (Cultural Services)  
Herefordshire Early Years Development  
and Childcare Partnership

#### **Artists:**

Anna Falcini, multimedia artist and  
workshop leader  
Liz Buckler, artist and advisor to the initial  
project, follow up workshop leader

#### **Funding:**

Herefordshire Early Years Development  
and Childcare Partnership

#### **Budget:**

£1,800

#### **Timescale:**

June-August 2006: eight half-day  
sessions, plus preparatory meetings

#### **Number of participants:**

80 pre-school children  
50 parents  
16 Sure Start workers



# Creative Parents Creative Children

## An ongoing collaboration between B arts and Sure Start Newcastle

The project aimed to develop a range of creative skills with parents, enhancing their lives and giving them more confidence and self-esteem. These skills and techniques can then be used to develop ways of interacting in play with their child, fostering all-important nurturing relationships. Finally this sense of well-being should spread throughout the family.

Sure Start Newcastle invited the community arts group B arts to work with them soon after the programme was set up. B arts was perceived to have skills, experience and an innovative approach that could meet the challenges faced by the community and deliver against the individual development aspirations of the Sure Start programme.

*Creative Parents Creative Children* was B arts' response to the challenge.

Initially the programme provided regular sessions in four different centres, complemented by a programme of outreach work and special events.

*Weave On* gave groups of women the chance to learn a native American weaving technique and to contrast that with the hand-knotting of rugs, a skill taught by an Afghan carpet maker. Eventually these groups extended their range of activities into jewellery, ceramics, felt making, masks and building temporary

structures in the form of family garden shelters.

Other projects have encouraged participants, including fathers, to look out and engage with the wider community, including:

- the Newcastle carnival procession
- a set of banners and the opening of the Newcastle Children's Centre
- *Lighting Up Time*, a whole village lantern procession

Several parents entered Urban Vision North Staffordshire's *Down Your Street*, a sub-regional open photography competition.

B arts have continued to develop their approach to what they deliver and how, seeking to find more ways of celebrating and rewarding parents' achievements. They are now accredited to award Open College Network (OCN) certificates for the arts sessions that parents attend. Awards evenings are held to hand out these certificates. This helps to raise the profile and sense of achievement for each recipient, further enhanced by the opportunity to dress up for a fairly glamorous occasion.



The *Creative Parents Creative Children* projects are strongly parent-focused, working to impart skills that will raise self-esteem through a sense of personal achievement. But recently more 'experienced' parents on the programme have asked to involve their children too – and so the *Help a Child...* project has been born. This will soon be celebrated with the publication of a book documenting all their activities.

**Contact for further information:**

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B arts

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# REP's Children

A project initiated by The REP theatre, Birmingham

*REP's Children* is an innovative family project developed to work initially with very young children. Parents of babies born at the City and Sandwell hospitals during October 2004 were offered the opportunity to sign up for a free theatre experience for their new baby, every year until they are ten years old. Over 200 babies were signed up to the project.

The theatre's aim is to develop and sustain a long-term relationship with those October 2004 *REP's Children*. The project aims to assist the children's personal, social and creative development, based upon the belief that live theatre can inspire, enrich and motivate babies, children and young people.

Every year, the families will come to The REP for free, to see theatre produced especially for the *REP's Children*. The first experience for the babies was *Open House*, a multi-sensory theatre experience in which babies and their parents were encouraged to interact with sound, light and action. The second production, *Dreams Come Out to Play*, took children aged one to four on a magical journey through a young girl's dreams. Both shows were performed at The REP and then toured community settings.



Image: *REP's Children* production 2006, *Dreams Come Out to Play*. Copyright Robert Day.

The most recent development, *Playmakers*, is a unique new project where nursery children and their parents, as well as *REP's Children* families, are all involved in creating the play. All elements of the play, which is the *REP's Children* year three project, and entitled *The Princess and Ginger*, will have been developed with families – characters, storyline, set, costumes and music. This groundbreaking project is being seen as a model not only for play-making but also for family learning.

Birmingham's Family Learning Service has supported The REP to appoint an early years worker who offers year round drama provision to *REP's Children* families and other young children throughout Birmingham.

The *REP's Children* project has developed relationships with a number of partners who enable their annual production to tour to more venues across Birmingham. These include Creative Partnerships, Sure Start and the Family Learning Service.

Sure Start settings that have shown the *REP's Children* productions to date are:

- Handsworth
- Small Heath
- Lye
- Saltley and Ward End
- Balsall Heath
- Lozells and Duddeston
- Heathfield
- Birmingham South West
- Sparkbrook
- Kingstanding

It is intended that the *REP's Children* project will start again with a new group of mothers and newborns in 2009, whilst maintaining the current ten year relationship and project activity with parents and their children born in 2004.

*"One of the most innovative arts education projects I've ever heard of"* David Milliband MP

**Contact for further information:**

The REP's Community Engagement Officer  
Phone: 0121 245 2159

Image: REP's Children families in the auditorium. Photographer: Ian Tennant





# Make Some Noise

## The Youth Music Action Zone for Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent

*Make Some Noise* is one of 24 Youth Music Action Zones in England and Wales. It provides activities across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent for children and young people with little access to music making. Children universally enjoy music making. They develop sharing and collaboration skills, as well as improvements to their physical, emotional and psychological well-being. There are further benefits: music making also develops motor skills and physical coordination. For parents, the activity supports the development of parenting skills and relationships with their children.

Development of music making for early years children is one of Youth Music's priority areas for the period 2005-2010. Their mission is to create a sustainable approach to high quality music delivery, to develop long-term partnerships and to advocate for music as a recreational and developmental opportunity for young people up to the age of 18. As part of this *Make Some Noise* has been offering workshops focused specifically on music making in early years settings.

On offer so far have been ideas and tools aiming to help participants become musically sensitive playmates with the confidence to integrate music into their everyday activities. There are specialist courses for early years workers with an interest in music and community musicians wishing to develop their work in the early years sector. Practical workshops are also directly available

to children and carers in early years settings.

All participants are introduced to a diverse range of musical instruments, with music sessions, games, singing and rhymes.

Since its inception, *Make Some Noise's* early years programme of activity has been able to expand thanks to support from and partnerships with Staffordshire's Early Years Unit and Stoke-on-Trent City Music and Performing Arts Service.

### Contact for further information:

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Website: [www.make-some-noise.com](http://www.make-some-noise.com)

Bongo Club is the new Youth Music online resource dedicated to early years music making: [www.bongoclub.org.uk](http://www.bongoclub.org.uk)

# Melody Monkey's Marvellous Music Box

## Worcestershire Sure Starts and Libraries

### Aims

To enable early years settings and the library service to engage in new ways of working with early years children and their families, particularly through the use of music making.

To encourage participation in music making by early years children in Worcestershire as a stimulus to personal development for participants.

To raise awareness of the importance and potential of early years music making amongst parents and carers, early years settings, libraries and agencies that count early years children and their families among their stakeholders.

### About the project

As well as providing children with the opportunity to enjoy music making, the programme also enabled one or more members of staff at each library or early years setting to receive training in leading music making with early years children, practising their skills under the guidance of the professional music leaders.

At the beginning of the programme, workshop leadership was spread between a team of seven professional musicians.

As they gained in confidence and experience, the setting-based trainees began to take over the leadership of the sessions.

By the end of the programme, many trainees were leading the whole session themselves.

The programme used *Melody Monkey's Marvellous Music Box*.

This is a box of music making resources including songs, games, instruments and puppets appropriate for early years children. It was developed by Cathy Dew and Sue Hollingworth for Music4U, the Humber Region Youth Music Action Zone.

In addition to the setting-based training, there were two courses of three training sessions away from the children for all trainees. Session one introduced trainees to the contents of *Melody Monkey's Marvellous Music Box* and explored the pedagogical thinking that went into its design. Session two looked in more detail at some of the musical concepts that leaders should aim to introduce into the workshops and gave guidance about how to plan a session. Session three was timetabled towards the end of the programme and was designed to help trainees as they continued to use *Melody Monkey's Marvellous Music Box* without the support of the music leader. This session looked at where to go for additional resources, and ways in which the materials in the box could be used with babies and their carers.

The project involved 600 early years children in approximately 260 music making sessions shared between a team of professional musicians at 11 early years settings and 22 libraries.

**Contact for further information:**

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**For information on purchasing a  
Melody Monkey Box contact:**

Music4U – the Humber Region Youth Music  
Action Zone

[www.humber-music4u.com/earlyyears.shtml](http://www.humber-music4u.com/earlyyears.shtml)

Phone: 01904 632220



Image: Puppets from *Melody Monkey's Marvellous Music Box*. Image courtesy of Worcester News

Information on artists and other arts resources focused on early years activity is available from **aliss** (Artists and Learning Information and Support Service) at [www.aliss.org.uk](http://www.aliss.org.uk)

For further information about the work of Arts Council England, West Midlands in early years development, contact the West Midlands Education and Learning Team at Arts Council England, phone: 0845 300 6200.

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