

The Music House for Children

Music and movement for Little Crickets

Cathnor Children's Centre

Spring/Summer observation 2009.

Final Report

The Little Crickets babies and toddlers music group comprised of largely children with severely impaired hearing loss, or with recent cochlear implants, rendering new ways of listening and training required. The Music House for Children ran music and movement sessions each week for a period of three terms by request and as a result of the Cathnor Children's Centre's decision to find independent funding.

In the event some of the finance was put forward by the parents themselves as they saw very quickly the benefits that music was having on their child and as part of the relationship development between parent and child.

The Little Crickets deaf group comprised:

Ella – approximately 18 months

Veronika – approximately 18 months

Ernie – approximately 30 months

Eliza (hearing) – approximately 18 months

Audrey – approximately 32 months

Alex – approximately 30 months

Samaya – approximately 2 years

Towards the end of the spring term 2009 the following changes were noted from the normal dynamics of the regular group of children with hearing loss.

Class observation

Spring term

Ernie uttered Quack in pitch when I did so. He then began to sing his own song. Alex, normally shy and reserved in response took my claves and played them tip tap on his mother's knee. It could be that he was feeling the sound through the texture of his mother's trousers – soft and quiet.

Audrey uttered "beep beep" when I had played the car horn and went to a toy car (large one), and opened the door. She did lots of pointing and saying "Emma" as tho' I was meant to get into the car. Veronica uttered several "la la la" sounds in repetitive response to my songs. Audrey then played her instrument – maraca – exactly in time to my own playing (on the cornet) – to "one man went to mow". When moving around to the pulse, Audrey called my name many times, walking unaided by her mother – by choice. She also performed a real march, that is, moved her arms firmly back and forth in time. She also uttered "diddy da" noises as she spun round to go the other way (as suggested many times by myself). She then went up and down physically uttering "UP" and "DOWN" several times.

During a moment with the guitar when I knocked on the wood, Audrey uttered "Knock knock". In this one session I observed huge leaps and bounds from all participants. It was as if their confidence and ability was absolute. They mirrored their actions and sounds through what they had seen so many times before, but with confidence and conviction. Interestingly they occasionally uttered sounds without movement, suggesting that my own physical animation matched the sounds that they knew they could 'hear' through their body. By remaining animated throughout all sessions, and encouraging the mothers to do so, the children were able to extend physical activity to sound – it simply 'fell out'.

Alex observed throughout this session (as was normal), however he really focussed on specific sounds such as the wooden clicking noises the claves made, the cornet with which he asked to hear by pointing. He was not response with the guitar, suggesting the gentle multi layers of sounds through different strings may not be enough, or the sounds he heard distressed his limited frequencies of hearing. In addition I wonder if he actually heard the guitar since, when I picked it up to play he was resistant. Perhaps it was an inanimate object - the thing that I seemingly responded to and he could not. Perhaps he is – like so many children – single minded enjoys a linear focus with

greater depth, rather than strummy sounds and blurred movement. His sense of enjoyment and understanding seems to be absolute when given this 'sound opportunity'.

This session has pinpointed several characteristics of each child, all of whom are obviously getting older and beginning to enjoy social and musical challenges with confidence.

Summer term

This term saw the continuation and completion of a monumental year of musical achievement and response by this group. In the early part of the term we enjoyed the company of Cooper, Audrey, Adrian, Sawa, Maude, Zia, Jonah, Erin, Alex, Ella and Veronika. The age range of the group and drop-in of new participants sometimes made progress harder to see. However one of the key observations throughout this term was that the regular participants appeared to quickly inform and empower new children with their responses and animated engagement. Adrian, Sawa and Cooper undoubtedly engaged more quickly than if they had been with a completely new group. Hearing children are often resistant to new experiences. With musical engagement there was a sense that a new child felt compelled to respond because

The activity looked so much fun

The sounds they heard compelled them to move/respond

Other children were confident, inviting and giving the 'it's okay' message

Appropriate activities and songs linked to the child's evident ability and subsequent understanding of what was expected.

With a hearing loss it became apparent that much of what went on outside of music making had some affect on each child's mood that day. The progress of music lessons often had to consider how to bring them out of a grump or abstract thought – and to fully engage as well as to simply learn the normal progressive listening, focal and motor skills attached to each lesson. The most remarkable lessons observed were ones that achieved this within minutes. Clearly music making had the power to lift and to encourage re-engagement, even at this young age.

On the other side of the coin, any part of the session could transfer a child away from the activity. This is more evident in children with a hearing loss since sensory play can bring about instant recollection of an earlier experience. A hearing child may enjoy a fleeting memory link, before continuing with the activity. In this case we observed children going off onto new adventures -

Snippets of observation as reported above in an example session

12th May

The welcome song was too long today. Timing and it's use is so fragile when retaining every child's interest. We made silly sounds – "brrrrrr, ba ba ba, brrrrrrrrrr, diddly diddly dum. Diddly diddly dum." These were accompanied by any physical action felt – mothers, myself and the children saw and did. Ernie was straight into this – having a conversation with me, his mother, a toy, frowning and chatting. None of it made sense to me but all of it made sense to him and goodness, we chatted about this and that.

I played the xylophone up (showing the instrument as on a tilt. Jonah uttered "UP". "DOWN" and slap on the floor – Veronika slapped the floor everytime. Waitng, arms up and SLAP! What a girl – normally still and watching, she was off with perfect timing.

The windmill came out – Jonah tried to say this. Lots of "Whhhha" from me and lippy movements. Perfect. He felt the blow of the letter as I encouraged mum to do the same. His hands helped to bring the "WWah" out. His arms whisked round and round with the windmill as it spun. The mothers of all engaged brilliantly with an immediate understanding of what I was trying to do – phonetic with actions and feeling how it could be done. Blowing, feeling, doing (imitation and spontaneous enjoyment).

I bought out the whistle – "oh! A mouse!" Lots of "MMMouse", Jonah got busy chatting to the mouse in mouse language – very hard to do since squeak sounds are invisible. My mouth was contorted sideways and out came the squeaks. The mouse climbed up – all hands up, mothers too (best mothers ever). "The wind blows East – BLOWWWWWW, the wind blows West – BLOWWWWWWWW" Marvellous for making the links between body, movement and sound. An ideal activity to enjoy at home with reference to specific words such as "hard", "happy", "harassed", "push", "puffing".

Instruments

We enjoyed windy noises with instruments. Shake the instrument, a moment of stillness, vocal and physical response. Jonah moved away from the group. He came back with a large picture book. Story time? Link to something more than just making sound? He wanted adventure in stories maybe. Ella was a true drummer, banging and stopping. Wait, bang and stop. Suddenly there was another side – a determined, independent musician playing, feeling and changing dynamics and tempo.

The timing of this session was hiccupped by focussing on just a few of the activities offered. Walking, moving and dancing were not successful since the children disengaged once we moved up. The session was over – they saw to that.

18th May

We enjoyed ducks, fish, pop-up puppets and stops and starts today. The duck activity involved waiting until the musical moment to 'throw' the duck into the pond. The mothers had their own duck and allowed their child to wait and throw at their own pace. This, they did WITH the music. I played the guitar and sang nice and slowly. They may have been imitating my own throw, however after a while it became apparent that they were waiting too. Ernie was in charge of his duck and would not let his mother throw. This was his job. Very good job too.

Different sounds

There are frequency issues that can be spotted with music making in children with a hearing loss. It was this area I enjoyed looking at since it could help families to pinpoint high and low sounds, squeaky, gruff sounds and multi/single track sounds that may support communication and focus.

Veronika has an edgy response to metallic sounds. She lifted her shoulders and winced as though it was unpleasant for her ears. Indeed, metal sounds often are unpleasant, however normal hearing has the ability to filter out unwanted lines of sound within the whole sound heard, making it more pleasing, or simply less evasive. I delivered unwanted sounds at regular intervals throughout the year. This was not because I enjoyed seeing the negative responses (Alex shrugged away the guitar sounds many times, too complex, quiet), but because I felt that each child had to learn to manage these sounds in everyday life – particularly in an urban environment with screeching bus brakes, sirens, slamming of doors, shouting, multi conversations.

As time went by the shrugging, the pulling the instrument off me, the walking away, head shaking became less and less.

Overview

Really, truly, at the end of this year I felt very pleased with this little group. It was they – the children and mothers – who had given each other so much in each session to take home. They (I hope) could enjoy new and additional ways of communicating with each other in a way that was fun and not contrived ("it has to be like this, this and this"), and to support them in relating their musical experiences to the world at large.

Music making at any time of the day is the key to supporting social, motor, vocal and focus development of these children up until they reach primary age and beyond. I know that each one of them will go confidently into nursery and be able to participate as fully as any child with complete hearing mechanisms in place. Much of this confidence arises from the parent/s. As a music facilitator we are acting as a vehicle to give parents ideas, and to demonstrate with their children so they can take them all with them.

I hope that each child will continue to participate in music making since music making activities provide the child-to-child focus in engagement – the fun element, whilst focusing on key components to strengthen any weaknesses in aural deficiency. Speech therapy, language therapy, hearing therapy and one to one visits to hearing specialists all have their place. However without musical participation – whether in structured sessions or independently – a sense of mutual interest, participation and learning in my view may be harder to achieve.

Enormous thanks are due to Cathnor Children's Centre for investing in music sessions with this group. The 'FUN' element of music making with deaf children needs to be highlighted. A lot of documented music delivery for hearing impaired children in the UK is heavy handed, loaded with obvious learning mechanisms and restrains mutual adult/child engagement. Activities also tend to put hearing impairment in a 'club' framework, creating a 'them and us' philosophy. This, in turn can create more anxiety for parents who have demonstrated an

undeniable wish for their child to find their unique place in society despite a hearing loss. The music making we have all enjoyed has removed any element of handicap simply by virtue of being inclusive, fun and wholly supportive.

Emma Hutchinson
Music specialist
The Music House for Children
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