



**interactive
music-making**
working with the under 5s

Involving Parents in Interactive Music-Making Sessions

Opportunities and Considerations

Sarah Hadley



Contents

Introduction	Page 2
Defining “Parents”	Page 3
Working with Parents – The National Context	Page 4
Working with Parents as an Interactive Music-Maker	Page 5
Parents as the experts in their children	Page 8
Supporting Parents in IMM practice	Page 11
The Practicalities	Page 14
Parents as Partners – Key Points	Page 15
10 Top Tips	Page 16
A Final Thought	Page 19

Introduction

This resource booklet was inspired by an Interactive Music-Making (IMM) Continuing Professional Development (CPD) session, “Involving Parents in IMM sessions”, held on the 14th July 2024.

This event led to a rich and insightful discussion as we explored working with parents as “experts in their children” within our IMM practice. IMM colleagues not only drew from experiences within their practice, but were most generous in drawing from their own lived experience of being experts in their own children, as parents. This was a particular privilege for me as the facilitator of the session for which I am most grateful. My sincere thanks to Beth, Carolyn and Dorota.

This booklet draws upon and develops upon a deeply reflective CPD discussion which we hope will help Interactive Music-Makers when they involve parents as experts in their IMM sessions and walk alongside them during the crucial early years of their parenting journey.

During the time we spent together, we unanimously agreed:

Parental involvement is key to achieving the optimum positive and sustainable IMM outcomes for children

However, as we delved into this subject we discovered that involving parents is such a complex entity that it would lend itself to a PhD research thesis!

Defining “Parents”

In our CPD session – and for the purposes of this resource – understanding what we mean by “parents” includes the following:

- **Parents extend beyond biological or adoptive parents**
- **They may include people holding Parental Responsibility (PR)**
- **Principal caregivers can be considered as parents**
- **The parenting role may be fluid, for example when parents are separated**
- **More than two people may be providing parenting for a child**



Working with Parents – The National Context



Research shows that involving parents and carers in their children’s learning is the most important factor in enabling some children to do well regardless of background.

Department for Education (2021, updated 25 April 2024) Working in partnership with parents and carers



Working in partnership with parents and/or carers is central to the [Early Years Foundation Stage \(EYFS\)](#). Consulting them about children’s early experiences helps practitioners plan for effective learning at the setting, and helps them support parents in continuing their children’s learning development at home.

Involving parents in their children’s learning | early years alliance (eyalliance.org.uk) 2003-2019 Pre-School Learning Alliance

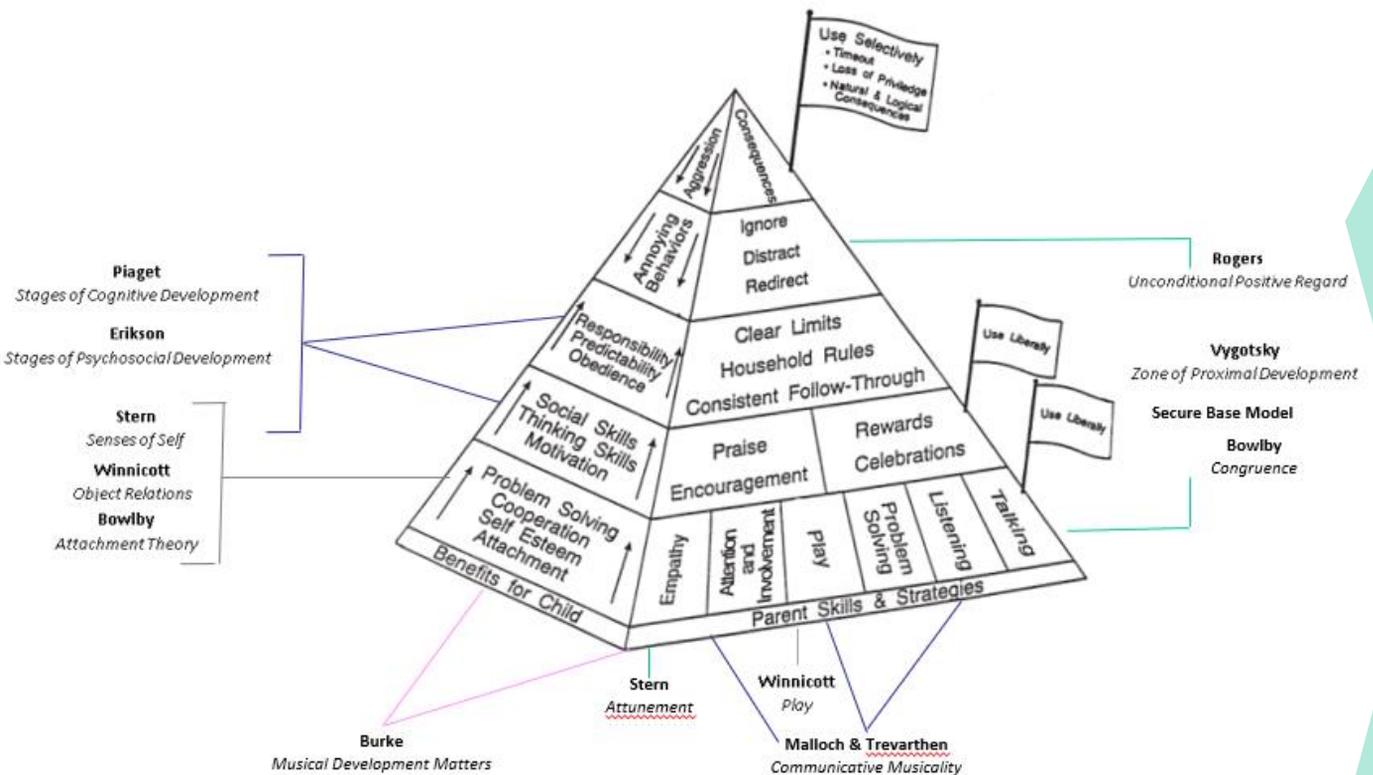
As we reviewed these two statements our discussion highlighted a synergy between the reason we want to involve parents in our IMM sessions and these two national drivers:

The parent plays an important role as an educator of their child. Interactive Music-Makers can promote this and strengthen parental confidence through involving parents in our IMM sessions within early years’ settings.

Working with Parents as an Interactive Music-Maker

Threading through the IMM training is a group of carefully selected theorists whose teaching underpins our practice. The theory component of the training programme can be a bit daunting and at this session we reflected on why we use these particular models of child development as the bedrock of IMM practice.

We determined that we were drawing on the views of renowned experts in their field who had dedicated time to research and expanded the knowledge base of how to promote healthy child development in the early years.



Working with Parents as an Interactive Music-Maker (...Cont'd)

We concluded that:

The theorists justify what we do and how we do it as IMM practitioners

The importance of this “justification” grew as we thought about how our understanding of our own competency as practitioners was brought to conscious realisation by studying the theorists.

For example, for years you may have been calmly telling children who have attempted to climb on furniture to *“put your feet on the floor”* rather than shouting *“Get Down!”* Carl Rogers, the exponent of unconditional positive regard which is fundamental to promoting the child’s positive sense of self, contextualises this intuitive translation of a safety instruction into a positive cue when a boundary is needed.

We learn that this non-judgmental approach makes all the difference and the epiphany moment happens:

*“So that’s **WHY** I do **THAT!**”*



Working with Parents as an Interactive Music-Maker (...Cont'd)

The theorists explored in the IMM training are intentionally chosen to provide a tool-kit in building a secure attachment with our children which we both consciously and intuitively employ during IMM sessions. For example, we mirror the child, by reflecting, extending, or following their initiation (Malloch and Trevarthen). Alternatively, we may be aware of their zone of proximal development, i.e. how close do they need to be for the secure attachment bond to be maintained, can they hold a little distance or do they need to be physically close to us? (Vygotsky).

Our IMM sessions are driven through the co-creation of musical interactions as we respond to the child's initiation of the most fundamental forms of musical expression in rhythm and pitch and speed (Stern). As we work alongside parents either in the session or in conversations about the sessions, we are continually demonstrating the model of secure attachment.

IMM practice manifests the bedrock of secure attachment which we need to share with the parents so their own competencies can be brought into consciousness.

The CPD group unanimously agreed that **competency is easier to achieve, whilst confidence is more elusive.**

However, we can develop a conscious awareness of our competency which in turn leads to the growth in our confidence in our competency, helped along by our theorists.

Often, we will find our parents in a similar position: They lack confidence in their capabilities and are unaware of what they are doing well.

IMM practitioners are therefore well-positioned to notice parental competency and let the parents know about their positive parenting skills.

Parents as the experts in their children

Extensive research has been undertaken into identifying parental styles of which there are said to be four; Authoritative; Authoritarian; Permissive; Uninvolved (Baumrind, 1966).

This research goes on to explore the impact of each parenting style on the child's life outcomes with "Authoritative" being deemed the most nurturing parenting style. It is acknowledged that parents' insights into their children will be influenced by the parenting style they have adopted, and indeed their own experiences of being parented.

In our discussions, we acknowledged that in some cases children were removed from their biological parents for safety reasons, but our CPD definition of parents enables us to recognise comparable roles held by all those who are the significant adults in the child's life (see page 3).

We focussed our discussions exclusively on the paradigm that the parents' insights into their children would bring expertise within our collaborative working, regardless of parenting style or origins of kinship.

Our conclusion?

The parents we work with need to be viewed as experts in their children, whether they (the parents) believe it or not. It is our duty of care to promote confidence and affirmation in their parenting capacity.

Parents as the experts in their children (...Cont'd)

Our discussion clarified that being an “expert in your child” did not mean that you had to know everything about your child and to have all the answers. Indeed, we agreed that being an expert parent involved “not knowing,” being able to “stand back” when someone else is more fitted to the task of resolving an issue, or alternatively giving your child space to be different and surprise you in different social contexts.

It was also highlighted that - for example, when attending a medical appointment - you *feel*/you might be the expert in your child’s needs, but you do not have the “certificate” and there is a sense of hierarchical expertise muting your parental voice.

Indeed, this scenario has the potential to translate into the IMM setting where we are using our skills, techniques, and experience to engage children within the music-making at a level parents feel they could not achieve. It is important at these times to remind the parents this is just half an hour a week, in a specialised setting, exploiting the highly motivating medium of music; we don’t have a magic wand, but the ways children engage in IMM sessions may demonstrate their potential, a potential which we need to see generalised into everyday settings which we depend on the parent to observe and report back to us.

A note about safeguarding concerns: In all circumstances it is important to liaise as a multi-professional team who may be working with the family and ensure any enduring concerns are shared and reported to the safeguarding lead (where indicated).

We discussed how parents may present when they lack confidence in their parenting skills. Our observations included:

- Intensity about getting “things right”
- Disinterest in their child
- Disaffection with their child
- Vicarious ambition projected onto their child
- Tunnel- vision on their perceived parental failings

Supporting Parents in IMM practice

We unanimously agreed that parents “need” to be the expert in their children, especially given the devastating impact that inconsistent parenting can have on the child’s life outcomes.

It is therefore important to consider, how can we promote parents’ positive sense of their parenting capacity and ownership of being the most significant adult for their child as an integral part of our IMM practice?

From our CPD discussions, I have distilled the following statement of commitment to how we agreed one can establish the foundations of a collaborative relationships between Interactive Music-Maker and Parent:

Interactive Music-Makers will seek to meet the parent wherever they are in their parenting journey.

The Interactive Music-Maker will proactively identify and celebrate the parent’s achievements before planning any next steps with the parent.

It is the parent who spends the majority of time with their child during the day and night, across a diverse range of social situations. It follows that if we can collaborate effectively with them, it will give us a unique and a broad insight into the children with whom we are working.

Supporting Parents in IMM practice (...Cont'd)

The parent carries the “whole” perspective of the child which provides a vitally important context in which to develop and apply relevant and targeted aims for the child in the focused setting of IMM.

It therefore seems to be a “no brainer” to ask the parent what they want out of the IMM sessions for their child.

In my experience when asking this question, I don't receive a nice neat aim from the parent, for example *“I would like Joe to be able to wait for his turn to play.”* Rather I get a narrative, which can be quite long and intense, particularly when the parent is worried about a specific aspect of their child's development.

It is therefore our job to distil this narrative, in collaboration with the parent, into a succinct and tangible aim to be pursued in our sessions. Over the page is a fictitious example of how such a conversation may play out.

The process of thinking together with a parent about their child can in itself de-escalate the anxiety of the parent.

In the example over the page, thinking together allows the parent to safely share their concerns, have a tangible strategy and therefore be more emotionally available to work with “Joe”'s need to control.



So, what would you like us to focus on in our Interactive Music-Making sessions? Tell me about Joe.

I'm not sure where to begin. My biggest problem is that everything, I mean **EVERYTHING** must be on Joe's terms. He gets so anxious if I suggest anything which is different from what he wants and he is only 4 years old! I mean, I know it is important for children to be independent, but he listens to no-one and I am worried that he will not take any notice of his teacher and learn new things.



I like the way you say that independence is important for children but I really get your concerns about how fixed Joe is in his ways, particularly when you said that Joe becomes "anxious." How does that look?

It's not very pretty. Shouting, kicking screaming the place down. I guess you would call it a meltdown. It doesn't feel "normal."



That sounds really difficult to manage. I noticed that word you used to describe Joe at these times was, "anxious." This behaviour may seem extreme but it's Joe's way of telling us he is anxious and you have understood him. This is an important part of being a caring and insightful parent.

I hadn't thought about it like that.



So, let's think about how we can help Joe with this anxiety. IMM is a great way of safely sharing and playing together on other people's terms. We have a really fun musical game where each child has a turn being the conductor of the rest of the group. Joe will get the chance to be the leader and then he will choose another child to take over the role. How about we try this?

That sounds like a great idea - perhaps we could also try this at home?



I like your thinking. Let's set an aim that: "**Joe will lead an activity and then be able to choose another child to be the leader and follow their lead.**" Remember, this aim is our desired destination; we are on a journey. We will be looking out for the smallest signs that Joe is being able to let go of being In control. Are you coming to the coffee morning in 3 weeks' time, we could catch up then?

Yes, that works for me.



Supporting Parents in IMM practice (...Cont'd)

The CPD group drew out some of the interpersonal qualities we felt important to meaningful co-working with parents.



Collaborating at this level means that as practitioners we let go of our position of “power” and share our IMM practice with the parent as a tool through which they too can navigate their child’s development.

The Practicalities

Day to day life in any early years setting is full-on; making time to meet with parents is yet another time pressure which is difficult to accommodate. However, one member of the CPD group shared their own difficult experience as a parent when she attended a music group with her child and had no opportunity to speak to the group leader. It was unanimously agreed that we needed to find a way to embed conversations with parents into our IMM practice.

We considered those “pockets” of time around sessions when we are either setting up or clearing up; could we have informal conversations at these times with parents? (paying attention to the confidentiality of the environment and ensuring that we are not talking about the child in front of them). Another colleague felt that parental involvement was so important that they would build parent feedback groups into their schedule. In the fictional scenario (page 12) the IMM practitioner suggested they had their follow-up conversation at an existing parent forum within the setting, “piggy backing” onto the parent coffee morning.

In essence the group advocated that:

We need to be creative in thinking about our use of time and proactively make opportunities to work with parents

You will be encouraged to know that the Department for Education explicitly states that parental involvement should not become a tracking exercise generating unnecessary paperwork, rather this collaboration is intrinsic to practice.

Parents as Partners – Key Points

To round up our discussion, we reflected on the key points advocated by the Early Years Coalition which helpfully resonated with our thinking.



Parents as Partners – key points

- ❖ Parents make a crucial difference to children's outcomes.
- ❖ Parents are children's first and most enduring educators.
- ❖ Each unique family must be welcomed and listened to.
- ❖ **Consider levels of engagement to make the most of relating to parents.**
- ❖ Practitioners have a responsibility to work with all families.
- ❖ **Clear leadership regarding partnership with parents will provide the right foundation.**

Early Years Coalition. (2021). *Birth to 5 Matters: Non-statutory guidance for the Early Years Foundation Stage*. St Albans: Early Education.

When perpetuating parental collaboration in the workplace we felt it was important to not only apply this within our day-to-day practice but also to have a strategic approach, external to our immediate working environment and think with other colleagues in partner organisations about parental involvement.

10 Top Tips

- 1) Make time to think with parents about their children** Life is busy, so be creative about using any opportune moments. Use existing meetings or schedule some protected time with parents where you can develop joint IMM aims and have a follow-up chat later after a few sessions.
- 2) Reframe negative thoughts into positive thoughts** The principles of Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR) work well when working with parents, especially those who are anxious about their children, as we think with them about challenges or difficulties. For example, explore together what the child may be communicating to us when they become distressed.
- 3) Notice and say what the parent is doing well** Watch out for parent/child interactions which are working well and feed these back to the parents in a conversational way (for example, opening with a statement “I really liked how you...”). This will promote parental conscious competency and confidence.
- 4) Provide ideas for positive containment strategies** Don't be afraid to offer suggestions based on the Webster-Stratton Parenting Pyramid - a tried and trusted model for containment techniques. Addressing all the parents at the same time, if appropriate, can avoid an individual parent feeling singled out.



10 Top Tips (Cont'd)

5) **Facilitate and promote support within your parent communities**

Look for opportunities to enable parents to connect with one another either within your sessions (e.g. by involving them directly in the musical activities) or offer a group feedback session to all parents of the children in your IMM group so that they can meet one another.

6) **Explain the purpose of your musical activities to your parents**

Sharing the developmental aims of the music-making, whether this is related to motor, communication, social or emotional development, will give the parents greater understanding and insight into the process of the IMM sessions and allow them to contribute in a more meaningful way.

7) **Provide opportunities for parents to influence the musical content of IMM sessions**

As parents become familiar with the IMM activities, invite them to choose which ones they feel are most beneficial for their child or simply if they have a favourite activity they would like to do. Your parents may have new songs they can teach you that are important to their child at home.

8) **Notice and explain the child's challenges and achievements in an equally positive way to parents**

We are skilled at spotting small signs of shared interaction, for example a slight smile or more relaxed body language, even if a child seems reluctant to participate. Look for opportunities to highlight and celebrate these small but significant social shifts with parents.

10 Top Tips (Cont'd)

9) **Build bridges between home and the sessions, encouraging parents to use musical motifs or activities at home**

Lots of people have hang ups about singing, and don't like the sound of their own voice, but the parent's voice is the best and most important voice in the world for their child. On this basis, encourage parents to sing with their children during the day, for example, bath time can be a good moment to sing and practice new words. There are also endless possibilities around the home for creating musical percussion; a wooden spoon and an up-turned saucepan is great for drumming.

10) **Always "close the loop" by asking the parents what they and their child have got out of the IMM sessions** Make time to reflect on the IMM journey travelled and celebrate your parents' achievements as well as those of their children.



A Final Thought

Alexia and I worked very hard on developing the IMM definition some 15 years ago:

Interactive Music-Making is a child-centred approach to music-making,

which establishes positive relationships

and fosters the child's individual potential.

Hadley, S and Guin, A (2023) Interactive Music -Making Definition: Introduction to the Learning Module Interactive Music -Making for Practice, Working with the Under 5's Music as Therapy International

When I revisited our IMM definition in preparation for this CPD session I wondered if Alexia and I were intentionally vague about exactly with whom these “positive relationships” would be established when we crafted our original definition.

Following our CPD explorations, I would put it to you that our secure-attachment practice approach in Interactive Music-Making not only lends itself to building positive relationships with our children but also with their parents, particularly when we place them at the centre of our practice and involve them directly in our IMM sessions.

Sarah Hadley
IMM Course Co-Founder



For more information about Interactive Music-Making training or accessing support for your IMM practice contact:
elsahariades@musicastherapy.org (Tel: 020 7735 3231)