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Sounds of Intent in the Early Years

Research and Dissemination Project

2015–2018



REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Adam Ockelford



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sounds of intent

in the early years



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Report and Recommendations

Adam Ockelford

Clare Cook

CEO, Soundabout

Foreword

For three years, the charity Soundabout worked across the country delivering targeted music making provision for very young children in areas of high deprivation, alongside their families and the dedicated early years teams who strive to ensure the best starts possible for the children in their care.

It is thanks to every family and early years provider involved that this project was able to happen at all, and we owe them a debt of gratitude. Thanks to their involvement at a very challenging time we have been able to show the noteworthy difference that musical intervention of this kind makes to children's development, particularly those with complex needs.

For over 20 years, Soundabout has worked to unlock the potential of people with complex needs through music and sound, and to empower parents, teachers and carers to do the same. The report's findings are highly significant for everyone concerned with the education and care of young children who are developmentally delayed, and show what we have always suspected – that music can make a real difference to these children's lives.

The legacy of this fully inclusive early years project, which was only made possible thanks to funding and support from Youth Music, is powerful evidence that every child in the UK (and beyond) should have the right to access to music, both for its own sake, and to support their wider development.





Matt Griffiths

CEO, Youth Music

Children's lives in music-making must start as soon as possible. The evidence is overwhelming in terms of the positive difference this makes for their own personal, social and musical development and for their families too. That's why early years has always been one of our priority areas at Youth Music and will continue to be so in the future.

I warmly welcome this timely and in depth report from Soundabout, which gives everyone working in this area a more comprehensive understanding of the benefits of music-making in early childhood and in particular for young children with complex needs and who live in areas of high deprivation. The research findings are invaluable to equip the workforce with up to date knowledge on how they can make the biggest difference and also to reinforce to government and policy makers the importance of music-making playing a central role in young lives as they discover the world around them.

If there's ever been a more important time for this, it's definitely now and I urge us all to read the report, digest the findings and, perhaps most importantly, take action so that this vital work becomes the norm.

KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An innovative project, based on the Sounds of Intent in the Early Years framework of musical development, was undertaken by the charity Soundabout, with funding from Youth Music, 2015–2018. A newly-created 10-week music programme for over 200 children in the early years and their families across England was run at Children's Centres and at other local hubs, specialising in provision for those with complex needs.

The key findings were that:

1. The musical development of children in the early years growing up in areas of high social deprivation may well be significantly delayed, but this can be ameliorated with targeted musical activities that last at least four months.
2. The capacity of children with complex needs in the early years to engage with music is likely to be profoundly delayed, in line with their other areas of development, but appropriate music programmes can increase their rate of musical development, and appear to have a greater impact than comparable interventions undertaken when the children are older.
3. Targeted interventions that consistently link functional, everyday language with simple melodies can have a positive impact on the speech of young children that is delayed.
4. Targeted interventions that help families and practitioners to engage through music with children in the early years who experience social deprivation, including those with complex needs, can improve children's capacity to listen and attend more generally, and can have a positive impact on their self-confidence and self-awareness and their capacity to make relationships and manage their feelings and behaviour.
5. It is not necessary for early years practitioners to be music specialists to understand how children develop musically, and to be able to support such development.

The recommendations are that:

1. A new, fully inclusive set of resources be created, comprising a set of cards for families, based on Sol-EY framework, setting out easy-to-use music activities suitable for all children in the early years; a series of songs and musical games to promote language, social and cognitive skills; and a set of training videos showing non-music specialists how children in the early years develop musically, and how to support that development. These should feature on a new, open access website, which should be promoted nationally through publicly and privately funded early years provision.
2. A new service for the families who have a child with complex needs be set up modelled on Little Amber, with free online resources available to all families, and regular visits from specially trained practitioners for some (according to the availability of funding).



1. SOUNDS OF INTENT IN THE EARLY YEARS (SOI-EY)

Sounds of Intent in the Early Years (Sol-EY) is a framework of musical development. It uses the findings of recent research in the field of music psychology to show how children's musical abilities and interests develop from the time before birth when their hearing starts to work, up to the age of five. It is a fully inclusive framework: it shows how all children can engage with music at some level.

2. PROJECT AIMS

The project reported here used the thinking behind Sol-EY to develop and trial musical activities and resources with 216 children in the early years who attended Children's Centres or other specialist provision across England. The aims of the project were:

To maximise the musical potential of disadvantaged young children by providing high quality musical opportunities targeted at their levels of musical development, and to gauge the efficacy of this approach.

To enhance children's wider learning and development through engagement in targeted musical activities, and to ascertain the impact of the latter upon the former.

To foster children's social and emotional development, and to promote social cohesion, through the effects of targeted music-making activities with others, and to assess the effectiveness of these.

To increase the confidence and skills of Children's Centre staff through making the Sol-EY resource and training available to them so that they could:

- better recognise children's stages of music development and
- develop high quality music-making opportunities for children in their care.

To improve current guidance on music provision in the Early Years Foundation Stage through the roll-out of Sol-EY and the development of a freely available online resource, helping to ensure that the importance of music in children's development and wellbeing is acknowledged nationally, and recognised in early years policies and guidance.



3. THE VALUES, BELIEFS AND ASSUMPTIONS THAT FRAMED THE PROJECT

In planning the project, the views of early years music practitioners were sought, and these were integrated with findings from the research literature to arrive at the following values, beliefs and assumptions that framed the work that was undertaken:

Being musical is part of being human: we all share an innate musicality, and **it is our birthright to have access to the music(s) of our culture.**

Musical interests and abilities start to develop three months before birth, and they continue to evolve all our lives. However, the most rapid period of development is in the early years, when learning can seem to be effortless. However, **adults need to work hard to give children the best possible musical start.**

How well children come to understand music, and how much they enjoy it, depends on the richness and diversity of the musical experiences they are offered, and the willingness of those around to engage with them in making music. This does not need special musical talents. **Music-making is something that we can all do.**

And it is vitally important. For children in early years settings, it is not the icing on the cake: **music is an essential ingredient in the multisensory mix of everyday activities that will enable young children to grow and meet their full potential.**

There is more to music than an activity to be enjoyed for its own sake: music is brain food! If very young children don't engage in musical play with adults, they may struggle to grasp language and to appreciate the feelings of others, and they may not come to relish the to and fro of social interaction. **Early musical engagement is a crucial element in wider development and wellbeing.**

4. SOI-EY – A SUMMARY

The complete Sounds of Intent framework identifies six levels of musical development. The Sol-EY framework utilises four of these:

Level 2: 'Sounds interesting'

Level 3: 'Copy me, copy you'

Level 4: 'Bits of pieces'

Level 5: 'Whole songs, in time and in tune'

Across these levels, Sol-EY acknowledges three domains of musical engagement:

Reactive (listening and responding to music)

Proactive (making music alone)

Interactive (engaging in music-making with others)

The four levels and three domains are represented visually as a set of concentric circles (see Figure 1).



sounds of intent

Framework *in the early years*

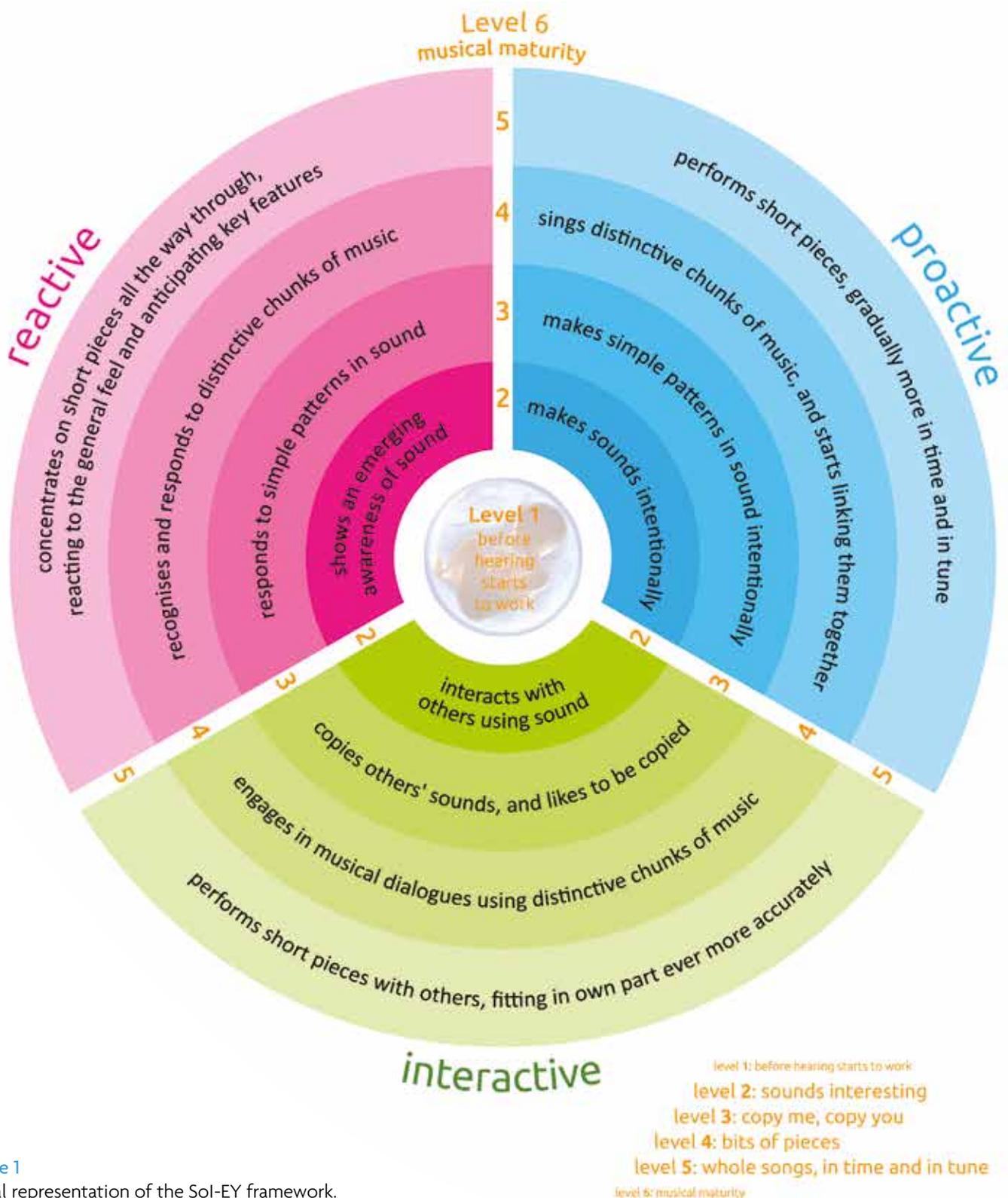


Figure 1
 Visual representation of the Sol-EY framework.

To assist practitioners in assessing children's level of musical development, and to plan appropriate activities, each of the 'headlines' of musical engagement shown in Figure 1 can be broken down into four more detailed 'elements'. These are shown in Figure 2.

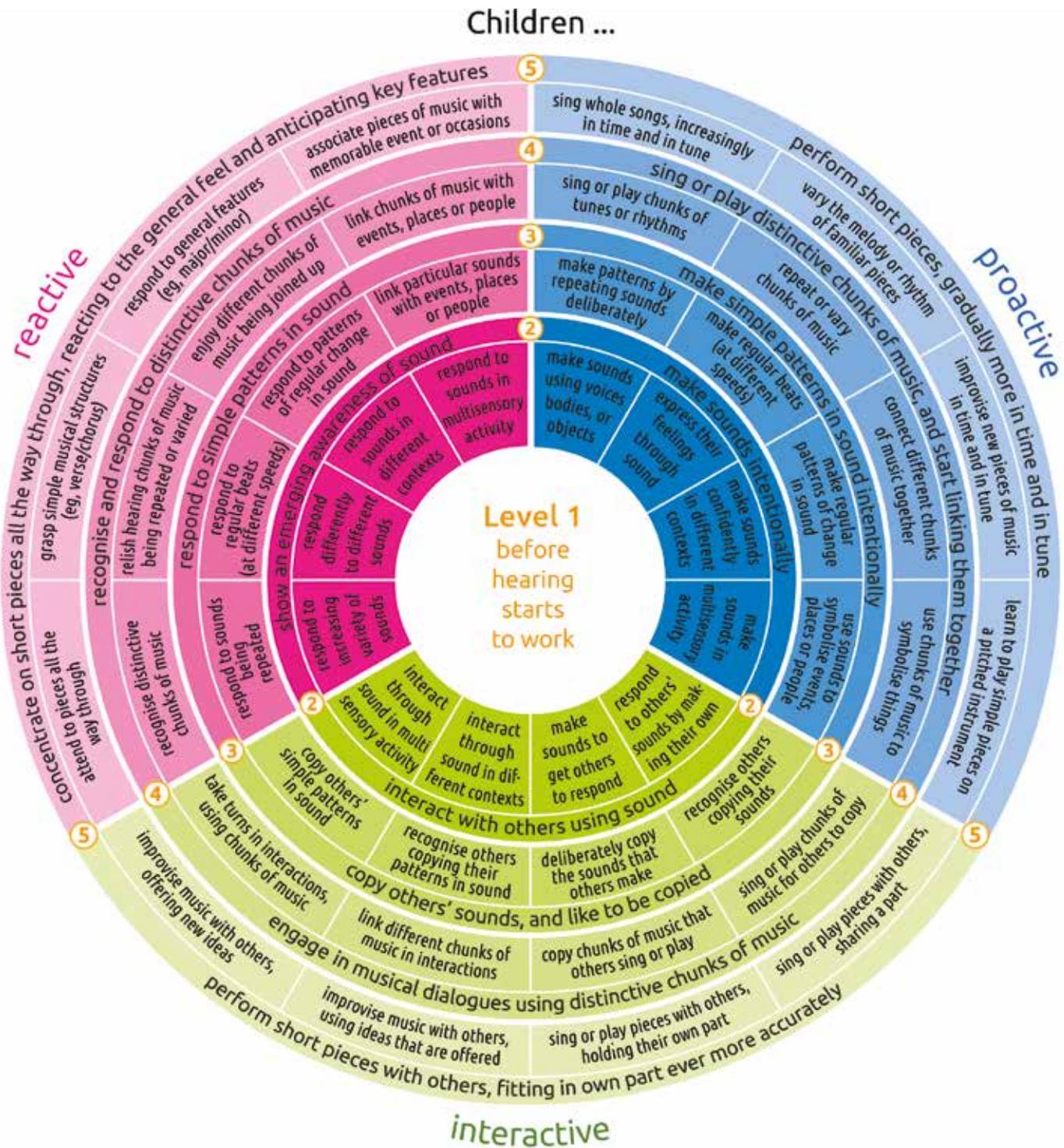


Figure 2 The more detailed version of the Sol-EY framework used by Soundabout practitioners

A study by Angela Voyajolu and Adam Ockelford published in 2016¹ sought to ascertain the extent to which the levels of musical development were age-related, taking its data from the current literature on music in the early years, and 125 observations of young children (aged from 10 weeks to five years) representing a broad demographic. An indicative trend emerged, across the reactive, proactive and interactive domains, which is shown in Figure 3. A key finding, though, is the wide spread of levels of musical development the children showed. Evidence from individual cases suggested that some of these differences could be attributable to the opportunities for engagement in musical activities that the children had experienced. Clearly, more extensive research was needed test this assumption, and the project reported here takes a significant step in that direction.

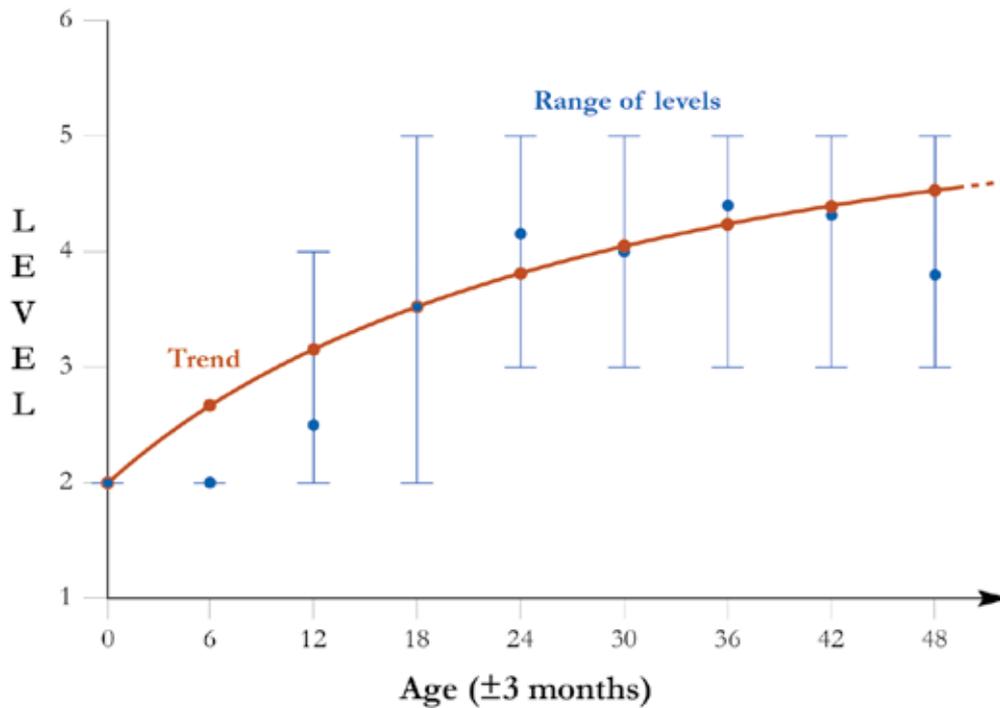


Figure 3
The connection between children's ages and their levels of musical development. (after Voyajolu and Ockelford, 2016).



¹A. Voyajolu and A. Ockelford (2016) 'Sounds of Intent in the Early Years: A proposed framework of young children's musical development', *Research Studies in Music Education*, 38, 93–113.

5. SOUNABOUT

Soundabout is a pioneering UK-wide charity that was launched in 1995 with the aim of empowering those working with children and young people with complex needs (who had profound and multiple learning difficulties or autism associated with severe learning difficulties) to make music interactively with their pupils and students in schools. This approach has continued successfully to the present day, and expanded in the first decade of the new century to include adults with learning difficulties and, to a limited extent, children in the early years. One of the challenges was to identify the families with babies and toddlers with complex needs, since only some would be in specialist early years provision. Hence it was decided to adopt a fully inclusive approach, devising strategies and resources based on the Sol-EY framework that were suitable for all children, which could be used in mixed groups.



6. RAISING AWARENESS OF THE PROJECT

The project was launched at a national conference in London, at which the Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, and the Youth Music CEO, Matt Griffiths, both spoke. This was followed by events held in each of the nine English regions, to raise awareness of our plans and of the importance of music in young children's lives more generally.

Further awareness raising, through publications and conferences, occurred at the beginning of the project, during its life and following its completion. Articles were written for three national magazines:

[Nursery World](#) online magazine (May 2015).

This article on Sol-EY received over 50,000 unique views within 7 days.

[Under 5](#) magazine (September 2015).

The publication of the Pre-school Learning Alliance. Distribution, c.14,000.

[Music Teacher](#) magazine (December 2015).

Distribution, c.20,000.

Papers and book chapters for academic publications include:

Voyajolu, A. and Ockelford, A. (2016)

'[Sounds of Intent in the Early Years: A proposed framework of young children's musical development](#)', Research Studies in Music Education, 38(1), 93–113.

Ockelford, A. and Voyajolu, A. (2017)

'[Musical play and play through music in early childhood](#)', in T. Bruce and M. Bredikyte (eds), Routledge Handbook of Play in Early Childhood, London: Routledge.

Ockelford, A. and Voyajolu, A. (2019)

'[The emergence of musical abilities in the early years: a perspective using the Sounds of Intent model](#)' in A.

Ockelford and G. Welch (eds) (2019), '[Essays in Applied Musicology: A Common Framework for Music Education and Psychology Research](#)', London: Routledge.

In addition to their regular readership, these items were downloaded 2,700 times from the Sol-EY website
Papers were presented at the following national and international conferences:

Voyajolu, A. and Ockelford, A. (2015)

'[Sounds of Intent in the Early Years: A new approach to framing musical development in early childhood](#)', ESCOM Ninth Triennial Conference, Northern Royal College of Music, Manchester.

Voyajolu, A. (2015)

'[Sounds of Intent in the Early Years: Assessing Musical Engagement in Pre-schoolers](#)', 7th International MERYC Conference, Tallin University, Estonia.

Axon, R. (2016)

'[Researching the musical engagement of infants with retinopathy of prematurity](#)', Examining the Utility of Music Interventions for Children with Learning Disabilities, Conference held at The Royal Society of Medicine (with Live Music Now), London.

Voyajolu, A. (2017)

'[Findings from the Sounds of Intent in the Early Years project](#)', EuNet MERYC Conference, Cambridge.

7. DELIVERY

The delivery of the project was undertaken by a team of specially trained practitioners working for Soundabout who ran 27 x 10 weekly music sessions to families with children in the early years and the staff who work with them in Children's Centres and other provision across England. The design of the intervention meant that activities were initially led by the practitioners, with responsibility for leading the sessions gradually transferring to local staff (who were not music specialists) and parents. This handover was to enable the sessions to continue once the project ended. In addition, parents were encouraged to engage their children in some of the interactive musical activities between sessions, as a form of shared play, to consolidate learning and to enrich family relationships.

The interventions were held in the following Children's Centres:

North East

Byker Sands Children's Centre, Newcastle, Tyne and Wear Ashington Children's Centre, Northumberland

Yorks and Humber

Bierley Children's Centre, Bradford, West Yorkshire Doncaster Children's Centre, South Yorkshire Kevin Pearce Children's Centre, Halifax, West Yorkshire

North West

Blacon Children's Centre, Chester, Cheshire Audley Children's Centre, Blackburn, Lancashire

East Midlands

Birdholme Children's Centre, Chesterfield, Derbyshire Penn Green Children's Centre, Corby, Northamptonshire

West Midlands

WANDS Children's Centre, Worcestershire Springfield Children's Centre, Birmingham

East

Community Link Children's Centre, Luton, Bedfordshire Hatfield Children's Centre, Hertfordshire

London

Perivale Children's Centre, Ealing Pembury Children's Centre, Haringey Morningside Children's Centre, Hackney

South East

Northumberland Children's Centre, Erith, Kent Milbrook Children's Centre, Wycombe, Bucks ACE Children's Centre, Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire

South West

Forest of Dean Children's Centre, Gloucestershire Hartcliffe Children's Centre, Bristol Culm Valley Children's Centre, Devon

In addition, the following specialist centres (specifically for children with special needs or disabilities) took part in the project:

Northumberland Portage Service, sessions delivered in Morpeth, Northumberland

Trafford SEN Advisory Service, Sale, Greater Manchester

Leicester Early Years SEN Support Service, Leicestershire

Hereford Portage Service, Herefordshire

Booker Park School Early Years Department, Aylesbury, Bucks

8. THE SOI-EY RESOURCES AND WEBSITE

A new website was developed as part of the project by Dr Evangelos Himonides at the Institute of Education, University College London – see eysoi.org. As well as providing general information about Sol-EY, and research papers, the site contained a set of freely downloadable resources that could be used by those participating in the project and anyone else with an interest in promoting or delivering music for children in the early years. The resources included:

A booklet, which was intended to

- give Early Years’ Practitioners a sense of how children’s musical development usually occurs;
- enable them to find out what their children’s levels of musical development are, and to chart their progress; and
- offer them ideas for what to do now and what to do next, given their children’s levels of musical development.

A copy of the Sol-EY framework (see Figure 1).

A blank recording sheet and music record form, and examples of both in use (see Figures 4 and 5).

sounds of intent
in the early years

sample music record

child's name
Keira Brindstock sheet # **1**

#	soi	observation	date	initial
1	R2B	Listened to the bell tree - giggled a lot	5.3.09	CW
2	PLA	Spent half an hour exploring the ocean drum - captivated!	4.4.09	CW
3	R2D	Loved playing with the cymbal - watching it glistening in the light as it vibrates	16.5.09	AK
4	R2A	Showed a distinct preference for the spooky sounds on the keyboard	7.6.09	JD
5	I2A	Enjoyed making raspberry sounds in response to me going 'dah' loudly	4.7.09	JD
6	PLC	Really got into playing the drum outside in the playground	13.9.09	JD
7	PLB	Whooped with delight when being pushed on the swing	21.10.09	JD
8	P3B	Made a regular beat, shaking the maracas	8.11.09	CW
9	PLD	Fascinated with the reinstick - watching and listening to the beads move	9.11.09	CW
10	P3D	Got very excited when playing the big drum louder and louder	7.12.09	PG
11	I2C	Enjoyed the scrunching sound of the leaves with the other children at Forest School	2.2.10	PG
12	R2C	Very engaged hearing the church bells ringing for a wedding	2.4.10	PG
13	R3C	Captivated by the changing sonorities of the dulgerindo played by a visiting musician	15.4.10	PG
14	R3C	Listened intently to someone playing the panpipes - tried having a go	1.5.10	PG
15	R3D	Understood that the gong in the classroom meant it was time for lunch	4.5.10	PG
16	R3D	Anticipated 'music time' by the bell-tree being shaken	2.6.10	PG
17	I2D	Very relaxed in the multisensory room, controlling the lights and sounds with me	3.6.10	AK
18	I2B	Tried to get me to respond by making 'popping' sounds with her lips	10.7.10	LS
19	I3A	Loved having her humming sounds copied	21.7.10	LS
20				

www.eysoi.org

Figure 4
Example of a completed Sol-EY recording sheet.

music record

sounds of intent

in the early years

child's name

Keira Brindstock

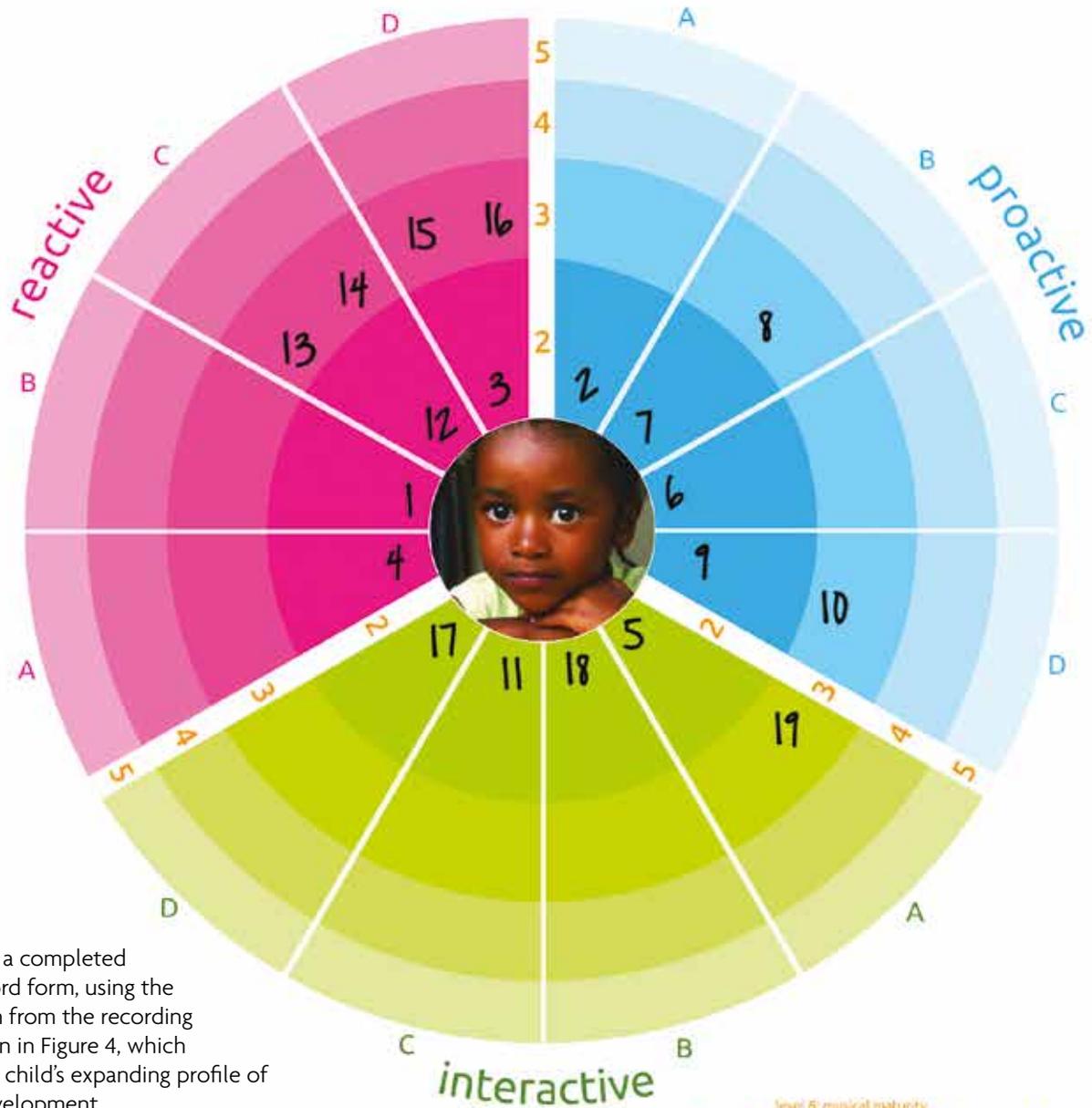


Figure 5
Example of a completed SoI-EY record form, using the information from the recording sheet shown in Figure 4, which illustrates a child's expanding profile of musical development.

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level 5: musical maturity
 level 5: whole songs, in time and in tune
 level 4: bits of pieces
 level 3: copy me, copy you
 level 2: sounds interesting
 level 1: before hearing starts to work



Print copies of these resources were distributed to all Children's Centres in England (a little over 3,000 of which existed in 2015). Further copies were made available to those attending the awareness raising and training sessions, which were attended by over 1,400 people, and there were 60,000 downloads from the website.

9. THE SESSIONS

The content of the sessions varied somewhat according to the needs and interests of the children and their families. Working with parents and colleagues working in the Children's Centres, Soundabout practitioners undertook baseline assessments of the children's levels of musical development using the Sol-EY framework. These were mapped onto suggestions for activities set out in the Sol-EY poster, which was distributed free to all Children's Centres in the UK (see Figure 6). Practitioners used the ideas on the poster as a basis for introducing additional, comparable activities drawn from their own experience.

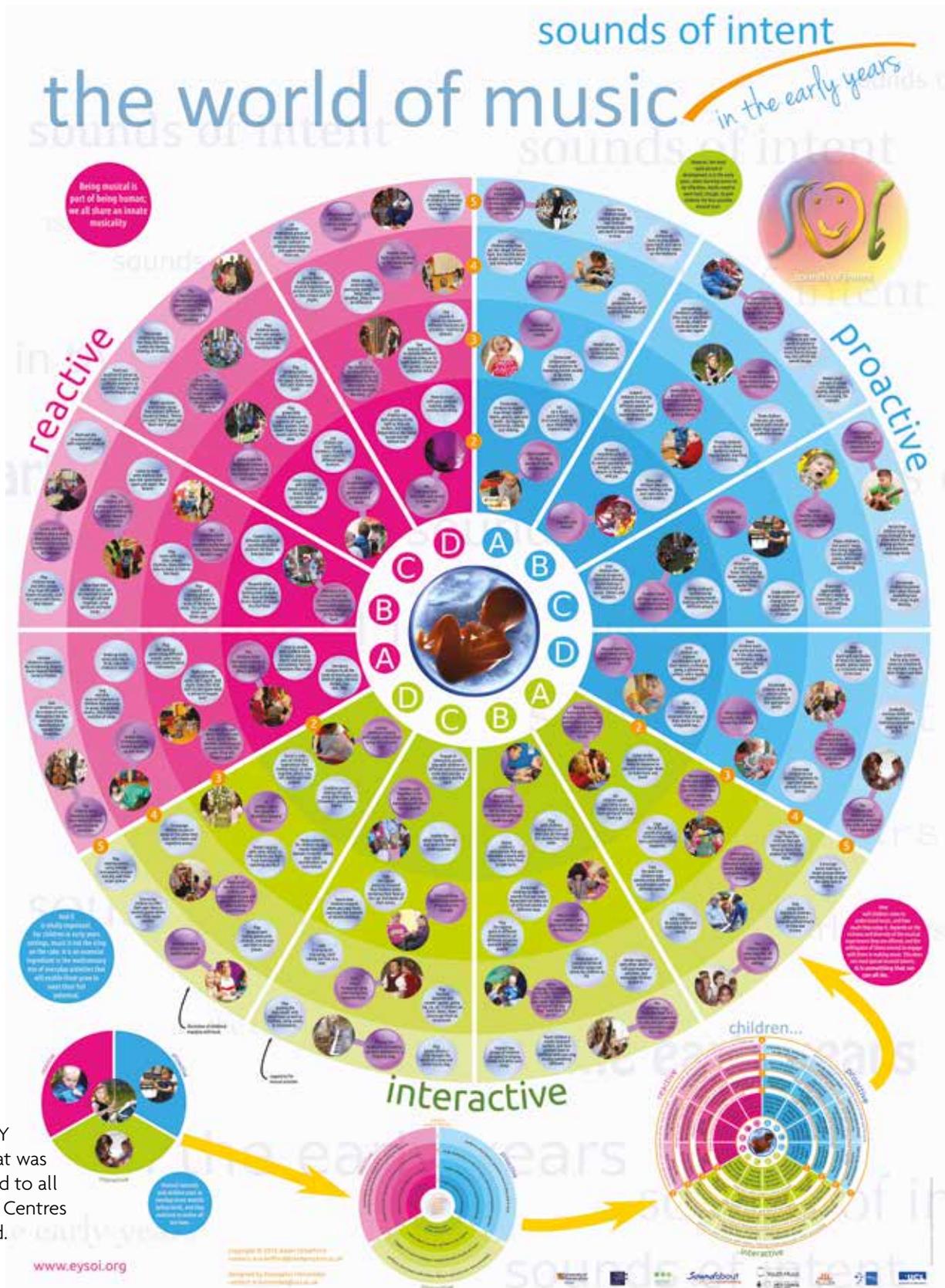


Figure 6
The Sol-EY poster that was distributed to all Children's Centres in England.

The most effective sessions were those that were fun and playful, but nonetheless had a clear structure that could be followed with few or no verbal instructions. This was particularly important not only for the very young children, who pre- or non-linguistic, but also for their parents and carers, for whom English was often an additional language. Sessions would begin with a greeting song for the whole group, followed by other musical activities that emphasised social skills (which included, as appropriate, doing things together, taking turns, listening to others, taking the lead and copying). Thereafter there would be opportunities for children to explore a range of instruments and other sound-makers individually, with the support of their parents or carers. Different ‘sound stations’ (initially covered with sheets to avoid distraction) would be set up around the room, each with a distinct theme: scrunchy papers, bells of different kinds, shakers and so on. Children were encouraged to explore things in their own time and in their own way, according to their prevailing schemas of the moment.

This child-centred, heuristic element of the sessions would be followed by further plenary activities. Here, the most skilled practitioners were adroit at differentiating forms of engagement within a common musical framework, eliciting different contributions from children according to their level of development. For example, to the children’s song *It’s Raining, It’s Pouring*, some, at the sensory stage (Sol Level 2), would be encouraged to make free-flowing sounds with a rainstick, while others who were starting to make intentional patterns in sound (Sol Level 3) would be prompted to keep a regular beat on a drum. Others yet, at the ‘bits of pieces’ stage (Sol Level 4), would be coaxed to sing the opening motif (‘It’s raining’) repeatedly, while the most advanced (Sol Level 5) were helped to sing the whole song, all the way through. Parents and carers were urged to engage in the activities as fellow members of the group, modelling actions and scaffolding the children’s attempts to participate, both vocally and physically, always working hand-under-hand rather than hand-over-hand, so their young protégés were always in control. Crucially, children who wanted to participate just by observing and listening to what others were doing were given the time and the space to do so, absorbing what was going on, sometimes for several weeks, before choosing to have a go themselves. The ends of sessions were invariably telegraphed using the same sequence of three or four songs, ending with a musical ‘goodbye’.

In Year 3 of the project, in response to the fact that the delay in children’s spoken language was increasing despite the musical interventions, each session drew upon a selection of materials taken from a set originally written by Adam Ockelford for visually impaired children with learning difficulties². This had recently been published by Jessica Kingsley in a revised and expanded version called *Tuning In*, funded by the MariaMarina Foundation through The Amber Trust. The 64 songs were designed to promote wider learning and development, including movement, understanding, social skills and – in particular – language. This was done by consistently setting key words and everyday phrases to the same fragments of melody, thereby supporting learning and recall in a way that, it was believed, would be especially effective in children whose verbal communication skills were delayed. Examples of the motifs are shown in Figure 7, and their use in songs is illustrated in Figure 8.



² In a music programme entitled *All Join In!* that was published by the RNIB in 1996.

Key words and phrases motif map

Hel - lo

Yes please

No thank you

More, more, I'd like some more

Thank you

Fin - ished

Good-bye

Figure 7
Examples of key words and phrases that form part of the Tuning In materials.

Goodbye

Dmin^{7sus4} Dmin⁷/F G^{sus4} G C C/B Amin⁷ F⁹ G

Good-bye, good - bye, good-bye a -

C F^{M7} Emin⁷ Dmin⁹ F G^{sus4}

- gain, We'll see you [next week] and so un - til then, Good -

Emin F^{M7} C/E Emin Amin Dmin^{sus4} Emin G⁷ C

bye, good - bye, good - bye a - gain.

Finished

E^b

Fin_ ished. Fin_ ished. Now [mu-sic] has fin - ished,

Gmin B^bmin/F C⁷/E Fmin B^{b7} E^b

[mu-sic] has fin - ished, What's hap-pen-ing next?

Figure 8
Examples of songs that use key words that form part of Tuning In.

In neurological terms, these ‘micro-songs’ tap into the fact that language and music share some resources in the brain³. For children who are unable to make speech sounds, all that is needed is to reproduce the rhythm and the shape of the melodic fragment associated with a word or phrase to be understood. The impact of the Tuning In resources (and others comparable that were produced by the practitioners themselves) is evident in Finding 5 below.

10. FINDINGS

A number of important findings emerged from the project. We begin by considering the data pertaining to the 182 children in the study who did not have complex needs.

FINDING 1

The musical development of children in the early years growing up in areas of high social deprivation may well be significantly delayed.

The children in the study attended Children’s Centres, who tended to be disadvantaged socially and developmentally, began the intervention at just over the age of two, when they were already, on average, behind their musical ‘age related expectations’ (‘ARE’) as gauged in relation to the Sol-EY framework (Voyajolu and Ockelford, 2016). Specifically, in the:

REACTIVE domain, there was a delay of 6 months; in the **PROACTIVE** domain, there was a delay of 9 months; and in the **INTERACTIVE** domain, there was a delay of 9½ months.



³See [Music, Language, and the Brain](#) by Aniruddh Patel, published by Oxford University Press in 2010.

FINDING 2

Interventions that help families and practitioners to engage through music with children in the early years who experience social deprivation can ameliorate delays in their musical development.

During the 10-week interventions, children's average rate of musical development increased beyond that which would typically have been expected, meaning that their music developmental delay was reduced. Specifically, in the:

REACTIVE domain, the delay was entirely eliminated; in the

PROACTIVE domain, the delay was reduced to 3½ months; and in the

INTERACTIVE domain, the delay was reduced to 5½ months.

Using these data, it is possible to extrapolate the length of an intervention that would be needed to eliminate the average delay in musical development completely. Indicatively, in the proactive domain, a further four weeks would be required, and in the interactive domain, a further six weeks (see Figure 9). However, because a group of young children will typically show a wide range of levels of musical development, and because their rates of progress will tend to flatten out (see Figure 3), these figures are likely to be conservative. Hence, those planning music projects and services with children in the early years in areas of high social deprivation should regard a period of four months as the minimum duration of interventions that are likely to be effective.



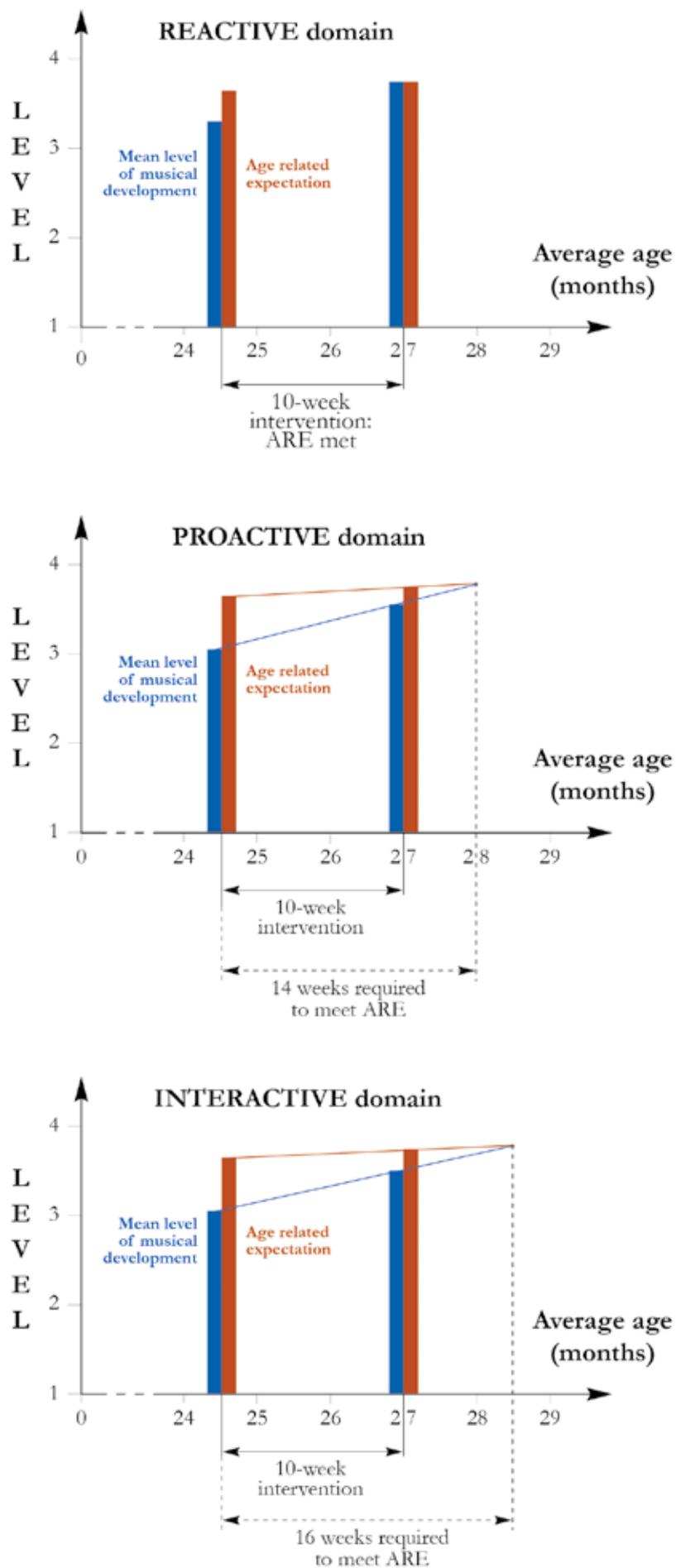


Figure 9

The impact of the intervention in each of the three domains of musical engagement, and indicative extrapolations as to the length of time required to reach AREs.

FINDING 3

The capacity of children with complex needs in the early years to engage with music is likely to be profoundly delayed, in line with their other areas of development.

Thirty-four children in the study had complex needs (in the form of profound and multiple learning difficulties). Their mean age at the onset of the project was 3½ years. In all three domains of musical engagement, the children were on average three years behind ARE, functioning in round terms at a level that neurotypical children would typically attain around 6 months of age.

FINDING 4

Interventions that help families and practitioners to engage through music with children in the early years with complex needs can increase their rate of musical development, and appear to have a greater impact than comparable interventions undertaken when the children are older.

During the 10-week interventions, children's average rate of musical development increased beyond that which had occurred before, meaning that their music-developmental delay was reduced. Specifically, in the: **REACTIVE** domain, the children moved on average from a 6-month music-developmental level to one of 18 months; and in the

PROACTIVE and **INTERACTIVE** domains, the children moved from a 6-month developmental level to one of 12 months.

The changes are shown in Figure 10. This finding is particularly important, since it appears that the rate of change is more rapid than that made later in childhood; the work by Ockelford et al., 2011⁴, suggested that children and young people with complex needs would progress, on average, one Sounds of Intent level during their whole time at school. Why should this be the case? It may be that children with complex needs in the early years have a greater neural plasticity than that found later in childhood, as is the case with their abled-bodied peers. Clearly, this represents a crucial further area of research for those working in this field. If early intervention is beneficial for all children's development, it seems nothing less than essential for those with complex needs.



⁴ See A. Ockelford, G. Welch, L. Jewell-Gore, E. Cheng, A. Vogiatzoglou and E. Himonides (2011) 'Sounds of Intent Phase 2: gauging the musical development of children with complex needs', *European Journal of Special Needs Education*, 26(2), 177–199.

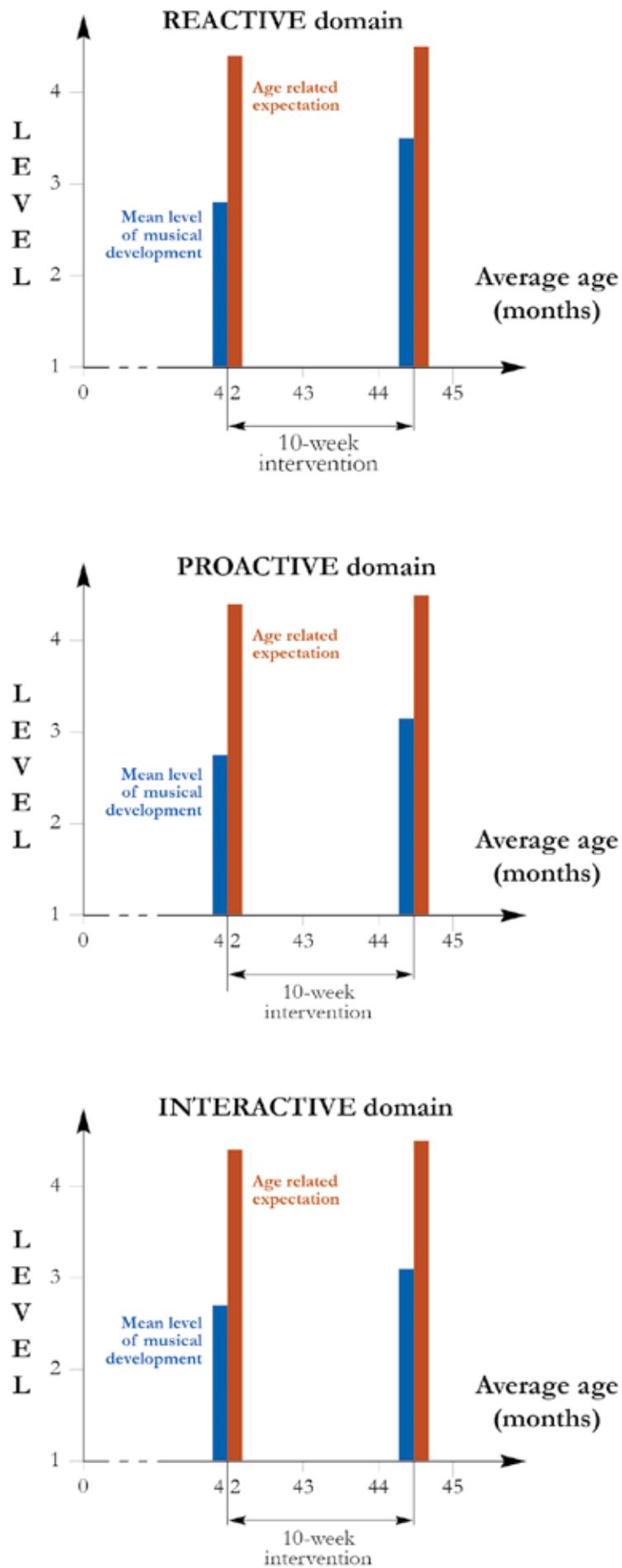


Figure 10

The impact of the intervention in each of the three domains of musical engagement with children in the early years with complex needs.

FINDING 5

Targeted interventions that consistently link functional, everyday language with simple melodies can have a positive impact on the speech of young children that is delayed.

At the start of the project, children’s speaking skills were, on average, six months behind their ARE, judged in relation to a refined version of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) assessment framework⁵. During the first two years of the 10-week interventions, their expressive language slipped even further behind ARE (to seven months). In an effort to counter this, a selection of the newly created Tuning In resources were introduced into sessions that were particularly appropriate in early years’ contexts. Subsequently, the children’s speaking skills advanced developmentally by 1½ months – a little more than would be predicted with a linear improvement (one month), and a distinct improvement on the first two years of the project. For children with complex needs, the effect was greater, with the chronological/functional age gap narrowing by 2½ months. As the numbers of children involved were relatively small, these findings should be treated as indicative. Nonetheless, they point to a potentially valuable approach that merits further research and dissemination.



⁵EYFS assessments generally work as follows. Children’s developmental levels are allocated to one of six bands, based on age in months. These are: 0–11 months, 8–20 months, 16–26 months, 22–35 months, 30–50 months, 40–60 months. Typically, children’s abilities are judged to be ‘emerging, expected or exceeding’ in each of the bands. For the Sol-EY project, this system was refined whereby 5 levels were identified within each band (scored 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5). To analyse the data, band 1 (0–11 months) added 0; band 2 (8–20 months) added 5; band 3 (16–26 months) added 10; band 4 (22–35 months) added 15; band 4 (30–50 months) added 20; and band 6 (40–60 months) added 25. Because it is possible for children to be judged to be in more than one band at the same time, a developmental score (the mean) was calculated for each area (speaking, and listening and attention). This notional score was then converted into a ‘developmental age’, using the following scale, which takes the change in age assumed in each of the 6 EYFS bands, and divides this between the 5 levels that were identified in each band. Hence increments of change in chronological age vary across the scale:

EYFS mean score	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Corresponding developmental age (months)	0	2	4	6	8	10	12	13.5	15	16.5	18	19.5	21	22.5	24
EYFS mean score	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30
Corresponding developmental age (months)	27	30	33	36	39	42	44	46	48	50	52	54	56	58	60

FINDING 6

Interventions that help families and practitioners to engage through music with children in the early years who experience social deprivation, including those with complex needs, can improve children's capacity to listen and attend more generally.

One might expect that listening and attending would be particularly strongly affected by the music sessions, and this proved to be the case. In the 10-week intervention periods, levels of listening and attending of children who did not have complex needs rose developmentally from 21½ to 24½ months, four weeks more than would have been predicted without the intervention. Were the rate of improvement to continue (with an ongoing music intervention), then a further eight weeks would be required for children to catch up with their ARE. The cohort of children with complex needs made relatively even more rapid progress from a much lower base, gaining an extra two months of development. What would have happened to their listening and attending skills had the intervention continued? Given the complexity of their intellectual impairment, we would expect their development eventually to have plateaued at a level below 'neurotypical' norms. But what is not known is the extent to which the intervention may have helped them to achieve more than would otherwise have been the case. Clearly, this is an important area for further research.

FINDING 7

Interventions that help families and practitioners to engage through music with children in the early years who experience social deprivation, including those with complex needs, can have a positive impact on their self-confidence and self-awareness, and their capacity to make relationships and manage their feelings and behaviour.

Within the main cohort of children (who did not have complex needs), the 10-week interventions had a moderate impact on participants' self-confidence and self-awareness, and their capacity to make relationships and manage their feelings and behaviour, at least preventing further delay. For those with complex needs, the interventions had no observable effect on self-confidence or self-awareness and at most only a small impact on the children's ability to manage their feelings and behaviour. It was in their capacity to make relationships where the greatest change occurred, with the developmental gap narrowing by 2½ months from a very low base (around 2½ years behind ARE). It may be that this developmental acceleration occurred as music offers a unique vehicle for 'intensive interaction' – the key to mutual understanding and empathy among those with profound and multiple learning difficulties⁶.



⁶See [Approaches to Communication through Music](#) by Margaret Corke, first published in 2002 by David Fulton.

FINDING 8

Early Years Practitioners (EYPs) who are not music specialists can develop an understanding of how young children develop musically as set out in the Sol-EY framework, and can support their musical development.

From training and support they received in the course of the 10-week interventions, and by using the materials that were made freely available on the Sol-EY website, EYPs learnt

how young children develop musically,

how this development is conceptualised and may be assessed using the Sol-EY framework,

how to devise appropriate activities for music sessions with young children,

how to create a suitable environment in which music can flourish, and

how to use music to promote wider learning, development and wellbeing in young children.

EYPs tended to rate their own knowledge and abilities higher than their Soundabout mentors before the intervention began, though this difference halved by the end, suggesting that their self-awareness grew during the interventions. They started out 'not knowing what they didn't know'. Their comments were telling. For example:

A has been an amazing role model demonstrating how to run the groups and encouraging children and parents to participate in activities. I have learnt lots from her and have really enjoyed the groups as did all the parents and children. A really enjoyable programme with a fab teacher. Thank you.

B has been valuable in the centre. I have learnt a lot about children's musical development. Gained lots of ideas to run music sessions.

C has been amazing and it has been a pleasure to work with her. The parents have enjoyed a different adult leading the sessions too. The children have gained a huge amount from having this experience, which we fully intend to continue. Watching some children blossom with confidence within the small groups has been a joy to see.

Being part of this music project, I have gained more knowledge how to support children's learning through musical instruments and music. How to use age appropriate songs and instruments. Loved the songs and resources used in the group. Knowledge and delivery of group was excellent. Thank you.

This course has inspired me to use some of the session into the Peep course I run to promote listening. I feel participating in this course and running sessions has helped me feel more confident in running my own music courses. It has also given me lots of songs to sing. Thank you.

Sessions were very good. (Eye opener.) Very different to what I had thought. I have really enjoyed being a part of these sessions.



11. LEGACY

The Sol-EY project took place at a time when many public services were in decline, and Children's Centres were no exception, with an estimated 1,000 of them (30%) having closed in the last decade⁷. The Centres that have survived have typically seen a reduction in services, with fewer group activities open to all the families in an area, and consequent changes in staffing. These frustrated efforts to track the impact of the Sol-EY project a year on, since key people were often no longer in post, and only three of the Centres who had taken part in the project responded to a short questionnaire (and follow up telephone calls) in January 2019. While two of the Centres were still engaging in the types of activity promoted in the Sol-EY project, one had stopped music sessions altogether. However, traffic on the Sol-EY website has continued to be strong, with a further 4,000 unique visitors in the last 12 months.

There have been other important developments too, related to Soundabout's Sol-EY initiative. The most advanced of these is the 'Little Amber' initiative, pioneered by The Amber Trust, www.ambertrust.org, which was launched in September 2017. 'Little Amber' is an innovative service for blind and partially-sighted children in the early years and their families, with two strands: freely available resources (online and as a 'deck of cards'), and a series of home visits for 60 families at any one time, by specially trained early years music practitioners. See Figure 11. Examples of the activity cards (whether in print or online version) are shown in Figure 12.

The Amber Trust
Music for Blind Children

Little Amber

Music for visually impaired children under the age of five

Music is not just a pastime, it's a lifeline

Registered Charity No: 1090503 • Company No: 3117903 • President: HRH The Duchess of Cornwall

Little Amber

Little Amber is an innovative service offered by The Amber Trust. It aims to enable blind or partially-sighted babies and young children to engage with music by providing families and professionals with resources and ideas for music-making.

Little Amber has two elements. The first is access to freely available resources that can be viewed online or downloaded. These are open to all families and professionals worldwide.

The second is the Little Amber Music Awards scheme, available to families in the UK. Families involved in the scheme will be given a set of activity cards and will receive four home visits a year by a specially trained practitioner, who will show parents, carers and siblings musical activities to do at home or when out and about. Little Amber Music Awards run until a child's fifth birthday, after which families are eligible to apply for a main Amber Trust Music Award. (Visit www.ambertrust.org for further information.)

Music is particularly important for babies and young children who are visually impaired. Research spearheaded by The Amber Trust has shown that music-making has a positive impact on children's lives in a way that nothing else does. The benefits include:

- bonding with parents and carers
- learning to listen carefully
- developing language
- finding out about the world around
- playing and having fun!

Some blind and partially sighted children develop special musical skills when they are still very young, and for them, getting the right support is vital.

Figure 11
Promotional leaflet for The Amber Trust's early years music scheme.

⁷ Stop Start: Survival, Decline or Closure? Children's Centres in England, 2018, The Sutton Trust.



Figure 12
Examples of the Little Amber activity cards.

The cards are based on the four levels of musical development identified in Sol-EY that typically happen in the early years. There are 48 cards (virtual or printed), and on the back of each are 6 activities for parents to do with their children – so around 500 suggestions in all. These do not require special musical training. The online version contains downloadable audio and video files to support and motivate people in their use. Feedback from 60 families with visually impaired babies and young children receiving the visits, and the hundreds of others using the materials, has been immensely positive. Here is a model of music provision ripe for expansion into other areas.



12. RECOMMENDATIONS

Two recommendations emerge from the project.

RECOMMENDATION 1

Given the positive impact that targeted music interventions can have on children in the early years who experience social deprivation, it is recommended that a new, fully inclusive set of resources be created, comprising:

- a set of cards for families, based on Sol-EY framework, setting out easy-to-use music activities suitable for all children in the early years;
- a series of songs and musical games to promote language, social and cognitive skills; and
- a set of training videos showing non-music specialists how children in the early years develop musically, and how to support that development.

These should feature on a new, open access website, which should be promoted nationally through Children's Centres, nurseries and other early years provision.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Given the particularly positive impact that music can have on children with complex needs in the early years, it is recommended that a new service be set up modelled on Little Amber, with free online resources available to all families, and regular visits from specially trained practitioners for some (according to the availability of funding).





soundabout

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For more information about the work of the charity Soundabout's working using music to unlock the potential of people with complex needs you can find us on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram or visit www.soundabout.org.uk



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