

Talent 25 Research Programme Brief

## Creativity in the early years: Families' perspectives on arts, culture, and engagement

25-year creative talent plan – a Leicester city pilot study



## Introduction: Talent 25 longitudinal study – an overview

Talent 25 is a 25-year longitudinal intervention study, launched in Leicester in 2019, that explores the impact of creative and cultural engagement from the earliest years of childhood.

- Aim: To understand how early cultural participation can shape children’s development, wellbeing, and long-term opportunities.
- Approach: 440 children and their families were recruited across 12 cohorts in the pilot phase (2019-2023). Families participated in structured creative programmes and cultural events, supported by community artists and facilitators.
- Focus: The study pays particular attention to under-served communities, where social, economic, and environmental inequalities often limit access to cultural opportunities.
- Methods: Talent 25 uses a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative data with qualitative insights from families and practitioners.
- Theoretical framework: Underpinned by the theoretical domains framework, ecological systems theory, and models of community engagement, with a comprehensive theory of change guiding expected outcomes.
- Outcomes: The study aims to deliver a scalable model for increasing cultural participation, with the long-term ambition that all young people become:
  - i. Creatively and culturally engaged citizens, and/or
  - ii. Supported to achieve their potential as creative practitioners.

Talent 25 is the first known longitudinal study of its kind. Its ambition is to offer robust evidence on how to design, deliver, and sustain creative opportunities for children and families, particularly those in under-served communities. At a time when children and families face widening inequalities in accessing cultural opportunities, at different stages of the study phases, Talent 25 aims to provide timely evidence of what works to close those gaps, that can be adopted immediately by government, local authorities, and community partners to deliver fairer outcomes.

The first cohort of families joined Talent 25 in September 2019, with the final cohort (cohort 12) recruited in October 2023. In total, 440 children aged 3-12 months and their parents/carers from across Leicester have consented to take part. The cohort is evenly split by gender, with children currently ranging in age from one to six years. Talent 25 has engaged families from 34 nationalities, speaking 42 languages, reflecting the city’s rich diversity and strengthening the study with multiple cultural perspectives.



## Key findings: Creativity in the early years

National research continues to show that barriers to participation in arts and culture are closely linked to entrenched social and structural inequalities, including under-representation, economic disadvantage, discrimination and cultural bias. Families from low-income and minority backgrounds often face additional barriers, such as limited access to childcare, transport, and community resources, which restrict sustained engagement in creative and cultural activities (Ali et al 2025; ACE 2019; Creative PEC 2024; Sutton Trust 2024; Create London 2018;).

Talent 25 set out to explore how parents of young children define arts, creativity, and culture, and to understand their experiences of engaging with creative opportunities. Parents' perspectives demonstrate that these definitions are broad, inclusive, and shaped by intersecting factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. Recognising this diversity is essential for designing accessible and equitable cultural provision. This brief draws on evidence gathered between 2019 and 2023, providing insights from early years families on the benefits and challenges of creative and cultural participation. The findings include:

### Parents' definitions and perspectives

- Families often defined arts and creativity more broadly than statutory or sector definitions, reflecting lived experiences.
- Intersectional factors (age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status) strongly influence how families conceptualise and engage with creative activities.

### Benefits of engagement

- Bonding: Parents valued creative play as meaningful time with their child, essential for holistic development.
- Socialisation: Sessions created opportunities for parents and children to connect with others, build friendships, and reduce isolation.
- Wellbeing: Engagement improved mental health, reduced loneliness, and supported parents' ability to cope with social isolation (including during lockdown).
- Parenting practice: Parents learned to incorporate creativity into everyday child-rearing.

### Barriers and enablers

- Socio-economic status plays a central role in shaping access. Free or low-cost materials encouraged participation and replication of activities at home.
- Accessibility of venues and session design influenced engagement. Financial and time pressures remain significant barriers.
- Trust matters: Consistency of creative practitioners was highly valued; inconsistency sometimes led to disengagement.

### Programme design considerations

- Activities must be child-centred and age-appropriate to sustain engagement and build confidence.
- Provision should address the holistic needs of children and families, including social and economic contexts.
- Neighbourhood and community-based approaches can improve access in areas of deprivation.
- Online sessions offer flexibility but also highlight challenges of digital poverty, limited space, and attention spans.

Parents recognise creative and cultural engagement as essential for their children's development, wellbeing, and social connections. However, inequalities in access persist, particularly for low-income and minority communities. For cultural policy and practice to be inclusive, provision must:

- reflect families' broad and diverse definitions of arts and creativity,
- be designed around the needs of children and families,
- reduce cost and accessibility barriers,
- prioritise consistency and trust in delivery, and
- ensure digital provision does not reinforce inequalities.

Adopting these approaches can help embed creativity as part of a life-course strategy, supporting children from the earliest years and reducing disparities in access to cultural opportunities.

## Key messages

- Families define arts and creativity broadly, shaped by diverse identities and experiences.
- Creative engagement provides clear benefits – bonding, development, socialisation, and improved wellbeing.
- Socio-economic status is a major determinant of access – free/affordable provision is key.
- Accessibility and consistency of provision matter – families disengage when these are lacking.
- Child-centred, age-appropriate design supports confidence and long-term participation.
- Online provision offers flexibility but risks reinforcing digital inequalities.
- Neighbourhood and community-based approaches can widen access for families in deprived areas.

## Policy implications

- Embed creativity in the early years: Position arts and cultural activities as integral to child development and family wellbeing, not optional extras.
- Invest in accessibility: Ensure programmes are free or affordable, locally delivered, and supported with practical enablers such as transport and materials.
- Adopt community-based approaches: Work with neighbourhood organisations and local initiatives to reach under-served families.
- Prioritise consistency and trust: Support long-term relationships with creative practitioners and stable programme delivery.
- Design child-centred provision: Activities must be age-appropriate and responsive to children's holistic needs.
- Address digital inequalities: Provide solutions to digital poverty to ensure online and hybrid creative offers do not reinforce exclusion.

## Policy and practice relevance

The findings and recommendations from Talent 25 will provide timely evidence to inform national priorities across education, health, and culture. They are directly relevant to government departments, including the Department for Education (DfE), the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), as well as national bodies such as the NHS (children and young people's services) and Ofsted. The study also aligns with statutory frameworks and guidance, including Working Together to Safeguard Children, the Children Act, and early years and childcare policies and regulations. Beyond statutory bodies, the findings will support early years providers, creative and cultural organisations, and community and voluntary groups working with children and families. At international level, the insights are also of interest to organisations such as the World Health Organisation's Child and Adolescent Health and Development Unit. Locally, they will help children's services and local authorities shape strategies that promote equitable access to creative and cultural opportunities for children and families.



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### Further information

[Click here to read further reports from Talent 25](#)

### References:

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