

## Talent 25 Research Programme Brief

# Creative Beginnings: Benefits and Challenges of Early Years Participation: Evidence from Talent 25 on what supports – and what limits – early years 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. 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.

## Key findings: Creative beginnings: Benefits and challenges of early years participation

Early years engagement in creative and cultural activities can strengthen child development, family wellbeing, and community connections. Evidence from the Talent 25 programme highlights the wide-ranging benefits of such activities, as well as the barriers that limit participation, particularly for families in under-served communities. The key findings to date include:

### Benefits of engagement

- Socialisation for children and parents; opportunities to build friendships and reduce isolation.
- Quality bonding time between parents and children through shared play.
- Positive impacts on parental wellbeing and child development.
- Support for parents to integrate creativity into everyday child-rearing.
- Motivation driven by the belief that activities aid children’s development.





### Practical enablers

- Free or low-cost materials and accessible venues reduce barriers to participation.
- Clear, centralised information (for example, via the Family app/newsletters) helps families to find cultural opportunities.
- Having a consistent, trusted artist or facilitator builds confidence and trust.

### Barriers and challenges

- Socio-economic constraints, including cost, transport, and time pressures.
- Limited availability of local creative opportunities, especially in deprived areas.
- Inconsistency in facilitators leading to disengagement for some families.
- Age-appropriateness of sessions: some too long for babies/toddlers, others too short for sustained impact.
- Online delivery during COVID offered flexibility but highlighted digital poverty and challenges of space, attention span, and reduced interaction.

### Design considerations

- Activities must be child-centred, considering age, ability, and holistic family needs.
- Longer-term, neighbourhood-based engagement could enhance accessibility and sustainability.
- Ongoing co-design with parents and practitioners ensures programmes remain relevant and inclusive.

Creative and cultural activities in the early years provide clear benefits for children, parents, and communities. However, participation is shaped by socio-economic status, accessibility, and the design of provision. To maximise impact and reduce inequalities, programmes must be free or affordable, locally accessible, consistent in delivery, and co-designed with families. Embedding creative opportunities in neighbourhood settings and addressing digital inequalities will be key to ensuring that all children and families can share in the benefits of creative and cultural participation.

### Key messages

- Creative and cultural activities benefit families: they support children's development, strengthen parent-child bonds, improve wellbeing, and build social connections.
- Participation in creative activities fosters social connectedness and a sense of belonging, helping families from different backgrounds to build relationships and share experiences.
- Motivation is strong among parents
  - many see creative play as essential for their child's development and family bonding, and integrate it into everyday parenting.
- Barriers remain significant: Free or low-cost provision, local venues, and consistent facilitators are critical enablers of participation. Socio-economic disadvantage, accessibility barriers, and digital poverty limit families' ability to take part.
- Programme design matters: Engagement is strongest when programmes are child-centred, age-appropriate, culturally relevant, responsive to family needs, and encourage sustained engagement.
- Local approaches work best: Neighbourhood-based provision and co-design with families improves sustainability and inclusivity.
- Trusted relationships are key: Consistency of artists and staff helps to build confidence and reduces drop-out.
- Online delivery is a mixed picture – it offers flexibility but can reinforce inequalities if digital access and space are limited.



## Policy implications

- Position creativity as a core element of early years policy, recognising its role in supporting development, wellbeing, and family resilience.
- Invest in affordable and accessible provision – ensure activities are free or low-cost, delivered in trusted community venues, and supported with transport where needed.
- Resource consistency in delivery: Fund stable roles for creative practitioners to build trust and sustained engagement.
- Address digital inequality: Support families with devices, connectivity, and safe online spaces to ensure equitable access to creative opportunities.
- Embed child-centred design: Ensure provision is tailored to age, ability, and family circumstances, recognising holistic needs.
- Strengthen neighbourhood and community models: Invest in local approaches that embed creative participation in everyday family life.
- Formalise co-design: Involve families in shaping and evaluating provision to ensure relevance and long-term impact.

## 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 Digital, 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.



## Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the parents and carers participating in Talent 25, whose contributions have been central to shaping our understanding of how to engage under-served families in creative and cultural activities.

We also thank Arts Council England (ACE) and De Montfort University (DMU) for funding the pilot phase of this ground-breaking longitudinal study. Our appreciation extends to the Talent 25 senior management team, the cultural advisory group, and colleagues across DMU and ACE for their guidance and support.

### Talent 25 Research Programme Team

#### Professor Bertha Ochieng

Principal Investigator

#### Christopher Owens

Programme Manager

#### Madeeha Malamji

Programme Assistant & Finance Coordinator

#### Rebecca Ochieng

Research Assistant

#### Olga Tyson

Research Assistant

#### Ruichao Wang

Research Assistant

#### Philippa Steel

Creative and Cultural Development Officer

#### Josse Lucas

Participant Engagement Coordinator

### Talent 25 Research Advisory Group

Professor Kay De Vries

Professor Brian Brown

Dr Simi Akintoye

Dr Mark Crossley

Dr Abiodun Egbetokun

Dr Rachel Higdon

Melanie Knott

Dr Indrani Lahiri

Dr Adebowale Owoseni

Professor Tania Hart

Jessica Tickell (ACE)

Andrew Mowlah (ACE)

### Talent 25 Programme – Executive Steering Group

Richard Russell, Arts Council England

Rebecca Blackman, Arts Council England

Professor Simon Oldroyd, De Montfort University

Professor Mike Kagioglou, De Montfort University

### Further information

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

For more information please contact:

Professor Bertha Ochieng

Talent 25 Principal Investigator

Faculty of Health & Life Sciences

De Montfort University

Edith Murphy House

The Gateway

Leicester LE1 9BH

☎ 07970 743876

✉ [creativetalent25@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:creativetalent25@dmu.ac.uk)

🖱 [talent25.org.uk](http://talent25.org.uk)

✂ @DMUtalent25

📘 @Talent25

📷 @talent25DMU

This project is funded by Arts Council England and De Montfort University

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**Citing this report:**

Ochieng, B. (2025) *Talent 25 Research Brief 04: Creative Beginnings: Benefits and Challenges of Early Years Participation: Evidence from Talent 25 on what supports – and what limits – early years engagement*. UK, Leicester, De Montfort University.

Talent 25 Research Programme Brief 04

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Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND**