



Nurturing Babies During the COVID-19 Lockdown: Resilience, Art and Creativity

The Talent 25 Longitudinal Sub-sample Study

Executive Summary

January 2021



Acknowledgements

The insights and recommendations offered in this report are based on telephone interviews with parents of children aged 3-18 months who are taking part in the Talent 25 longitudinal study in Leicester City. We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to them for sharing their experiences of living through the first COVID-19 UK national lockdown from 23rd March 2020 – 10th May 2020. Their contributions have been invaluable and have revealed the hidden impact of lockdown on households with babies, as well as how creative activities for babies could be adapted in lockdown.

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“Talent is everywhere, opportunity is not. Every child has the capacity to be creative and opportunities to realise this potential should be equally available. We hope that Talent 25 will help us to better understand what might make a difference to young people’s talent development and cultural engagement. Our long-term ambition is that the lessons we learn as the programme evolves will support the cultural sector to develop its work with early years and that whilst we launch with excellent partners in Leicester, that the impact will be felt nationally.”

Darren Henley (2018)



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The Talent 25 Longitudinal Study

An Overview

The Talent 25 is a longitudinal intervention study that commenced in March 2019 in Leicester City and will run for 25 years. The study has several aims, including piloting a targeted four-year action research programme in Leicester that focusses on early years children and, by nature, their families (from currently less engaged demographic groups). The aim of the action research is to understand the interventions needed to increase cultural opportunities and engagement at the earliest possible point.

The first four-year pilot phase of the longitudinal study utilises a staggered-entry approach to recruit multiple cohorts totalling 400 children aged 3-12 months and their parents/ carers over a period of three years. Following consent, the parents complete a baseline questionnaire in order to understand their socio-demographic characteristics and definition of the arts, current engagement with the arts, beliefs and attitudes regarding art-based activities, their beliefs about the factors affecting their participation in arts-based and cultural activities, and their current quality of life satisfaction. The babies and parents then complete an eight-week intervention to Talent 25 comprising two-hour weekly diverse sessions of creative activities at community centres in Leicester, led by Talent 25 commissioned artists. Using a participatory approach, after the initial eight weeks, parents and their babies are encouraged to engage in a long-term schedule of age-appropriate creative activities and cultural events for the duration of the four-year pilot phase. Further data is collected at the end of the eight-week induction, and every six months until the end of the four-year pilot phase, at which point the participating families will be invited to consent to an annual survey until the child reaches the age of 25.

The post-intervention data collection during the first four years of the pilot phase will include questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, which are designed to assess the outcome for each participant after the intervention, and to understand the impact of the creative activities on their attitude to the arts and cultural engagement. As the children develop we will also examine their communication and language development, personal social and emotional development, literacy and understanding the world, and expressive arts and design as a part of school readiness. Given the nature of the longitudinal study, when the child is old enough and able to give consent, they will be invited to self-consent and complete the questionnaire themselves.

To identify if the activities are associated with any improvements, the research framework allows for a control group to be identified in an area similar to the intervention group but that does not receive the additional activity under the pilot. It is important to note that individuals from this control group are not excluded from engaging in arts and culture provisions already in place. We will also use national and regional populations for control purposes. The post-intervention data over the span of 25 years will provide a unique insight into the effects of participation in creative activities and cultural engagement from early childhood up to age 25.



The Talent 25 COVID-19 Lockdown Study

Background

This report presents the findings from a sub-sample study within the ongoing Talent 25 longitudinal study of parents and children. This sub-sample study was designed to capture the lived experiences of the Talent 25 families and their babies during the first UK national COVID-19 lockdown. It builds on numerous studies that highlight the role of the arts in helping to manage behaviour, process feelings, and reduce anxiety in stressful circumstances (Abbot, et al., 2013; Fancourt & Fin 2019; Saunders & Hogg 2020; Van Lith 2015).

Given the staggered-entry approach to recruiting multiple cohorts to the longitudinal study, the cohort one participants were recruited in September 2019 and had completed the initial eight-week-pilot creative activities – including participating in the Talent 25 organised visits to cultural events in Leicester city – before December 2019. The cohort two participants entered the study in February 2020 for the Talent 25 second set of eight-week activities, with activities running on Mondays (for cohort one) and Thursdays (for cohort two). Unfortunately, the set of the activities was paused at week six due to the lockdown. The programme is being adapted to suit the lockdown and social distancing measures introduced in March 2020 in response to the COVID-19 pandemic by making use of online delivery.

Data collection approach

Due to the nature of the lockdown and social distancing requirements, the data was collected through in-depth telephone interviews with 20 parents from cohort one (n=11) and two (n=9), who volunteered to participate in the sub-sample study. The interviews took place in May-June 2020, at which point participants had been in lockdown for about six weeks. Data was analysed using thematic analysis.

Participants

While 20 participants volunteered to participate in the interviews for this study, there were 29 participants in cohort one (n=15) and two (n=14) of the Talent 25 main study. All parents in cohort one were female with babies aged 6-18 months, and had an average age of 33 years. Over half of the sample reported English as their main language. Overall, of the parents in cohort one, 85% of the participants had a bachelor's (BA) degree or higher. The majority of the babies for cohort one were female. Cohort two comprised 14 females and one male, with babies aged 3-12 months. The average age of the parents in cohort two was 32 years. From cohort two, 27% of the sample reported having a bachelor's (BA) degree as their highest level of education, meaning that the education level of this cohort was lower than that of cohort one. The ethnicity of most parents from cohort one and two was Asian, which reflects the population of Leicester city. The 20 participants for this study were all female.

Key Findings

Following the data analysis, four main themes and sub-themes were identified from the telephone interviews with 20 participants. These themes relate to the hidden impact of lockdown on households with babies, and the adaptation of creative activities for babies in lockdown. They are:

1. Mental resilience and coping mechanisms during the lockdown

- a. Sibling relationships and creative activities at home
- b. Coping mechanism for forced lockdown and the changes in daily routine

2. Engagement with creativity during the COVID-19 lockdown

- a. Anxiety over outdoor activities away from the home
- b. Motivation to engage with art activities at home
- c. Parenting style and creativity during lockdown

3. From creative community centre closures to online groups

- a. Virtual playgroups as a context for creativity
- b. Virtual creative engagement as a distraction intervention
- c. Attitudes towards engagement in community-based creative activities post-lockdown

4. Challenges for engaging in creativity during lockdown

- a. Parental concept and confidence to engaging in creativity
- b. Creative space in the home environment
- c. Restrictions on social interaction during the lockdown
- d. Household patterns.



Mental resilience and coping mechanisms during the lockdown

Parents described the effect of preventive measures – such as physical distancing, home isolation, and quarantine – as challenging. Indeed, while some families went on walks in local parks, others mostly stayed at home. In relation to infants and children, parents explained that the lockdown was especially hard for them because they were used to outdoor activities and socialising with others. Participants described the programme as being an important source of ideas and keeping children usefully occupied during lockdown.

Creative activities at home and sibling relationships

Participants described how the household structure and inter-relational bonds within the family, including siblings, kept them occupied indoors during the lockdown. Given that the whole country was on lockdown, several parents stated that they found themselves having to structure different activities for their children that reflected their ages.

The activities they described were attributed and learnt from their participation in the Talent 25 creative sessions.

In multigenerational households, parents reported some of the benefits of being on lockdown, with their parents/in-laws and the grandparents and older siblings being able to help out with caring for and participating in activities with the baby.

“Yeah, I’ve been using the activities I learnt from the sessions to keep her [baby] active and I’ve seen that she’s really enjoying it, she’s also enjoying playing with her sisters and grandparents, we all join in now, everybody is at home you see.” Participant C1-003.

Coping mechanisms for forced lockdown and the changes in daily routine

Most parents described how they initially found the lockdown challenging and, for some of them, there was an added stress of working from home and keeping their babies and children busy with lockdown activities. In addition, the lockdown limited the range of activities they could engage with. Given that most of our participants were women, with some of them living in multigenerational households, they reported struggling to balance each household member’s routine with their own priorities. Most did not have a set routine at home despite some of them working from home. Instead, they discussed how they responded to each day differently and organised activities for the whole household.

“I personally thought I would struggle massively with the lockdown. With the three children being very different ages and living with my mum, and my job. But going to the Talent 25 and being given all these ideas, actually we’ve not struggled because we have found something different to do a lot of the time.” Participant C2-010.

Engagement with creativity during the COVID-19 lockdown

There are several motivating and inhibiting factors that influenced participation in creativity during the lockdown.

Anxiety over outdoor activities away from home

Most parents reported rarely leaving their homes despite the guidance allowing at least one form of exercise per day. While some parents described their anxiety in relation to the possibility of being infected with coronavirus, some parents stated that – where possible – they permitted their children to play in their own back gardens. However, parents actively limited the duration of outdoor activity times for their children.

“Yeah, everyone is staying safe and staying away from each other, trying to do the right thing as much as we can, so we have literally not left the house in six weeks, not even to do the shopping. Everyone is bringing it to us. Only to go for short walks with the baby and the big kids need to get out and about, but we try to do a lot of activities in the garden rather than go out.” Participant C1-014.

Motivation to engage with art activities at home

Most parents reported replicating the Talent 25 activities at home during the lockdown. Whereas some parents discussed how the activities they did at home were limited because of a lack of materials, other parents reported buying materials online to enable them to engage their babies and children with the activities they learnt during the creative sessions. While some parents asked if they could be sent materials to aid continuation of participation in creative activities at home, others described how they have adapted basic household items for creative play with their baby. **This may suggest that the Talent 25 activities are engendering creativity in the parent as well.**

“Basically, what the Talent 25 has done is to give me lots of ideas. I think it is all really engaging and has been really beneficial.” Participant C2-006.

“She’ll have the aluminium foil out, the blankets, also you know like these little scarves for the sensory classes and I was explaining to her (child’s grandmother) like these are the things that we are doing over there (the Talent 25 sessions), we can do it here as well.” Participant C1-009.

On the whole, creative activities were spoken of as informing art ideas, strategies, and resources deployed at home. Several parents described their engagement with the T25 creative activities as motivating, reinforcing, and making them more aware of the possibilities and potential of everyday household and environmental objects for creative play. By exploring a variety of available resources, parents can keep children busy and occupied. Not only that, but some parents described the effects of such creative activities on their baby’s mood. **Yet, it is not only babies that experienced the emotional benefits of creative engagement**, as highlighted by the parents:

“Well, it just makes me feel happy that the kids are enjoying themselves with these activities. And, obviously, if they are happy, then I am happy.” Participant C2-006.

“Actually, we’ve got a box of household items that I can now just add to, just like very similar to the ones we did in one of the sessions before we stopped. The children really enjoy them.” Participant C1-005.

These examples demonstrate that parents are able to extend their creative abilities by repurposing household and environmental resources for creative play. These resources also prove useful to parents in the COVID-19 context, where access to resources is limited.

“For example, before I joined the classes, any recycling thing, I was just chucking straight away, but now it’s like milk carton or a box or anything I would wipe it and he would love playing with it.” Participant C2-004.

“Rather than buying things, because obviously shops aren’t open, he also likes to play with a lot of things that are in the cupboard like lentils, like we’ll put them in a container, we’ll let him shake them up, like different pulses and dried pasta, so he can play with them.” Participant C1-001.

Parenting style and creativity during lockdown

Several parents reported how, through the participation in the Talent 25 activities, they have acquired skills of facilitating engagement with their babies, which have enhanced their parenting style in nurturing creativity from early childhood. They also discussed how such skills are benefitting their other children.

“I have probably started to engage more with my baby. I’m not a first-timer [has two older children] so I’ve done a lot of this anyway but you know... like I said [Talent 25] added different aspects to my teaching and caring [for] my baby and my children.” Participant C1-001.



From creative community centre closures to online groups

Virtual playgroups as a context for creativity

During the lockdown, some parents reported accessing online groups that were delivering activities for babies and children, which they described as being beneficial. They requested that the Talent 25 sessions be offered online too.

“We just want the activities to start as soon as possible. Maybe, if there was to be some sort of virtual lessons on Zoom as interaction for her...even if it is pre-recorded it will be really good.” Participant C2-003.

Virtual creative engagement as a distraction intervention

Some parents described accessing YouTube for lockdown activities for their children.

“There is loads of class stuff and projects to do and websites to go on – storybooks to watch and listen to and nursery rhymes to sing along to and that type of thing, so since the lockdown we’ve been doing that a lot, and it’s also because I wanted him to continue with the Talent 25 activities.” Participant C2-013.

Attitudes towards engagement in community-based creative activities post-lockdown

Despite eagerness to start the Talent 25 activities as soon as the lockdown ended, parents expressed concerns about COVID-19 infection. Participants looked forward to having a routine again and even suggested new activities to incorporate in the Talent 25.

“Getting back with the Talent 25 group would be really nice, because it was a good way to get us into a routine and it just broke up my day a little bit more, but I don’t know how they will run with the pandemic.” Participant C2-005.

“Maybe lockdown will be lifted. But I have a little bit of anxiety kind of with it. So, I don’t know, I’m not sure whether I can be maybe ready to come back and join the sessions? We are just scared about the COVID.” Participant C1-008.

Challenges for engaging in creativity during lockdown

Parental concept and confidence to engaging in creativity

Interestingly, some parents described themselves as being not creative or artistic enough and found it difficult to come up with new activity ideas. This was despite discussing the activities they did at home, which they thought were not creative. **This finding highlighted that although the definition of creativity is multifaceted, some parents felt insecure about their knowledge and skills by which they can initiate and engage in creative activities at home with their babies.**

“All the singing, reading, drawing, that’s fine, they are like standard learning, which is fine and I can do, but the kind of creative ones, I don’t think I am able to do those until I get back to the sessions.” Participant C1-013.

These findings suggest that some parents believe they do not have the knowledge or skills to initiate creative activities for their babies, and hence rely on structured practitioner creative-led activities. This in turn acts as a barrier to participation in creative activities at home. Therefore, the study will explore whether co-creation and participatory approaches can support creative learning for parents from less engaged groups, and include an exploration of wider beliefs about creativity.

Creative space in the home environment

Several parents also discussed the limitations of engaging in creative activities at home due to the restrictions of physical space, while some parents did not have access to outdoor gardens, which limited participation in activities both indoors and outdoors.

“I think the only difficult thing is, just being at home and there is not enough space, I think. I don’t have a garden unfortunately. If I did have a garden, I would set up lots of activities outside.” Participant C2-006.

“Yeah and the kind of messy play as well, he misses that, there’s not enough space, but he loves playing with water, so we try and make bath time an activity for him.” Participant C2-015.

“It’s not been that challenging because we do different things, but it’s just certain things like foam play, water play, you know the messy ones, which I’m not giving to him because of lack of space.” Participant C2-004.

Restrictions on social interaction during the lockdown

All parents described the Talent 25 activities as valuable, explicitly mentioning the benefits of participating in group activities, which they felt allowed them and their baby to socialise and interact with other families and children. Such interaction was described as beneficial to both parents and children. Lockdown limited access to such interaction and Talent 25, which – similar to all centres offering child activities – had been closed due to the lockdown.

“It was so beneficial for the babies and me, because we were all socialising... It was really beneficial for me too because I was able to socialise with other parents. I made a friend from there as well and that was really nice, and since the lockdown we’ve not seen each other.” Participant C2-006.

“We were in a really good routine doing different activities and just being able to get out of the house and meet other babies and other children, because there’s no other kind of like babies in the house, so it’s quite hard keeping them entertained all day.” Participant C2-015.

“I mean yeah, it’s a little bit difficult but she does miss social interaction with other babies her age. We were going to the Talent 25 and other playgroups like three, four times a week. From that to no interaction, it’s been hard for her.” Participant C1-014.

“It would be nice to interact with other people outside of the house, which is one of the things that we have missed out on most.” Participant C2-013.

“She [referring to her child] needs contact with other kids, because I think she is bored with me all day.” Participant C1-011.

Household patterns, multigenerational living, and challenges of engagement

In addition to managing a household routine, the parents reported finding it difficult to engage in creative activities at home if living in a multigenerational household, because of the different generational parenting styles.

“Well her grandparent is here with us. Sometimes she would do things that I don’t necessarily agree with...my daughter likes to explore places around the home and she often stops her from exploring and [the Talent 25 lead artist] often teaches us that we shouldn’t have boundaries to learning and exploring but her grandparent often stops her going into the kitchen or here or there, whereas I don’t mind, as long as she’s safe you know.” Participant C1-016.

Summary: The impact of the COVID-19 UK national lockdown on families

The findings suggest that parents initially identified social and relational stressors during the start of the UK nationwide lockdown. They appraise the lockdown – especially the first few weeks – as being ‘challenging’, ‘tough’, ‘difficult’, and ‘shocking’. This was stated due to restrictions put in place by the government to try to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Despite accepting the relevance of the advised restrictions to keep themselves and their families safe, parents mentioned that the sudden alienation from social networks and the need to engage children throughout the day proved challenging – especially whilst managing both household and work responsibilities. As such, although they identified several challenges of nurturing babies in lockdown, for most, participation in the Talent 25 programme gave them ideas to engage in creative activities with their babies at home, with some parents having for the first time explored artistic and creative activities with their babies during the lockdown.

Most parents reported engaging in the creative activities they learnt from the Talent 25 programme at home as a way of keeping their baby occupied during the COVID-19 UK national lockdown. Parents reported they initially found the concept and reality of lockdown difficult, but they soon got used to it and were largely positive when asked how they and their baby have been living through the lockdown. **The majority of the parents described how Talent 25 has influenced their parenting styles, and for those with older children they had adapted their child rearing styles to include creative play. Parents’ motivation to explore creative activities with their babies at home points to the potential efficacy of teaching creativity through creative programmes from early childhood, and in particular engendering creativity in parents from less engaged groups.** The findings show that parents tend to reinforce creative activities that support the baby’s interest, enjoyment, and satisfaction. **In addition, when parents engaged their children in creative practices during lockdown, they reported having experienced shared emotional and social satisfaction.**

The findings also demonstrated that engagement with creative activities during the COVID-19 lockdown has proven to be a collective effort that involves the baby, parent(s), older siblings, and grandparents. This highlights the value of creative activities in enhancing intergenerational engagement during a period of enhanced anxiety and fear as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The task of keeping children occupied, managing the needs of children of different ages, sorting out household chores, and – at times – taking care of ageing family members, points to the significant challenges experienced by parents during the COVID-19 lockdown. Despite several challenges and limitations, overall, the parents recognised and highlighted the potential of creative activities to enhance their parenting skills in developing curiosity, creativity, and imagination in their babies during lockdown. The findings so far emphasise how vital the sessions and activities were for the families and children. The reduction in opportunities for creative, recreational and educational activities during lockdown made the contribution of the Talent 25 activities all the more vital for families as it gave parents the skills of facilitating engagement with their babies during lockdown.

Other Partners

We would also like to thank our other partners for their various contributions on this project:

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The Spark (<https://www.thesparkarts.co.uk>) **Mammas** (<http://www.mammas.org.uk>)

Willows Health (<https://www.willowshealthcare.org>)

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