

# Wishing Well at The Alex: The impact of live music making in children's critical care



## How do you feel when you hear your favourite song?

The lullabies you remember from your childhood, the music you loved as a teenager, the song you chose for the first dance at your wedding all create vivid emotional memories that take us back to important times in our lives. We use music all the time to regulate our mood; to motivate us to go for a morning jog, to relax us after a hectic day or to comfort us during difficult times.

At around 20 weeks babies can hear the rhythmic beat of their mother's heart and sound filters into the womb, helping them to make sense of the world outside. Musicians in Healthcare tap into this hard wired response to sound to create music interactions that help babies, children and young people cope with the experience of hospitalisation.

"Wishing Well at The Alex" is a partnership project between Brighton based music charity, **Rhythmix** and **The Royal Alexandra Children's Hospital**. Now in its 4th year, the Wishing Well musicians work alongside staff to create music making interactions with babies, children, young people to support their "more than medical needs" whilst they are in hospital. The musicians bring familiar songs, acoustic instruments like cellos and guitars and simple iPad music technology; they put instruments into children's hands so they can step outside of their diagnosis and create, communicate and have fun.

### Evaluation

Evaluation Consultant **Dr Anneli Haake** was commissioned to produce a report on the programme which can be viewed in full at [www.wishingwellmusic.org.uk/evaluation](http://www.wishingwellmusic.org.uk/evaluation).

Dr Haake writes:

*"The musicians all observed positive effects for the patients, consistent with research on the effects that music in children's hospitals can have. These included enhancing cognitive abilities, communication skills, and physiological abilities. The parents/caregivers also responded positively to the music sessions, which is likely to have a positive effect on the child."*



*Imagine someone puts a cello on your bed, you can feel the vibration through your hands and feet. You get to pluck the strings and use the bow. Mum is singing with the musicians and smiling. You are surrounded by familiar sounds and are at the centre of an interaction that has nothing to do with your health and everything to do with being a child.*

### Challenges

- The fear and distress experienced during hospital stay leaves a footprint on children who are coping with the loss of familiar people, places and things.
- Children in hospital can feel disempowered as they lose a sense of agency and choice (Coyne and Livesley 2010).
- Neonatal care can disrupt bonding and the development of attachment behaviours which has a lasting impact on the developing child's mental health.
- Babies and children can become fearful of human contact when many of their interactions have a clinical focus.
- Colville (2015) suggests that 21% of parents/ carers have symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after paediatric Critical Care. The family unit is put under pressure and parental stress negatively impacts the child.

### Compassion



The sound of children's songs drifting down the corridor reminds us that our patients have needs beyond the medical. Our job is to enrich the lives of the families in our care, attuning to individual need and reducing the footprint of hospitalisation. Each music making interaction is led by baby, child or family. The Musicians negate stress and anxiety with soothing familiar songs, distract from boredom with gentle stimulation and use lullabies to create a space for maternal bonding. Music has become a vital part of the way we support families during end of life care, helping to create positive memories amidst the loss.

### Communication



Music helps children let out big feelings sideways; it helps them express how they feel and helps us build rapport with them. Instruments and simple music technology become vital means of communication to nonverbal children. This gives them a sense of choice and control which they may feel the lack of in the hospital environment.

The music project gives us a way of asking families "What matters to you" by engaging with through a non clinical intervention.

### Commitment



The critical care nursing team give the musicians vital context for their work, helping them tailor their interactions to meet individual needs. Musicians give staff a way to build rapport with our patients and work as part of the multi-disciplinary team to distract and soothe children during procedures or times of anxiety. From the Musician's session notes:

*"A member of the medical team asked us to visit a young person who was having a panic attack caused by pain. The patient was visibly distressed, with shallow rapid breathing, visible tension in the face and body, and wincing vocal sounds. The Nurse was speaking gently to the young person saying "just focus on the music". We surrounded him in very slow, gentle music. The young person's breathing became slower and more regular, and their body visibly relaxed, until they reached sleep."*