

SureStart



CONNECTING THROUGH SONG



Your Words Work Wonders



Report Findings October 2023



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Background

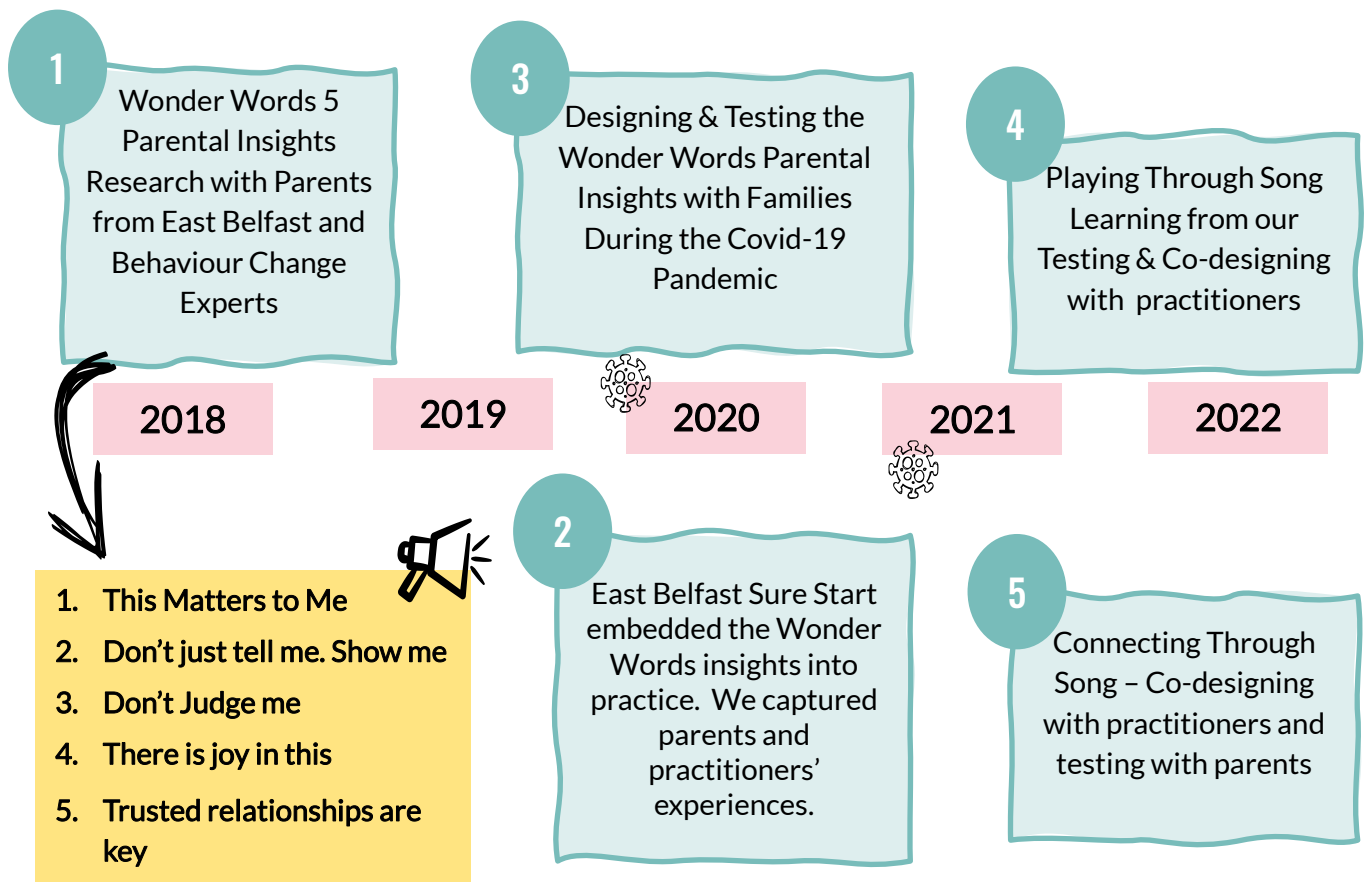
Save the Children work alongside children in 118 countries, including the UK. Across Northern Ireland we are working with children, families and partners in the places and spaces that matter to them: homes, Sure Start Centre, Nurseries, Schools and in the community.

We believe that all children should have the opportunity to arrive at school with language and communication skills that meet their age and stage related expectations – giving them a strong foundation for successful learning and development. The evidence from neuroscience is clear that the first years of a child’s life are critical for optimum brain development, and that the level of support, nurture, and resources during the first five years is the foundations for lifelong health and well-being.

Since 2018 we have been working in partnership with Sure Start and parents across Belfast to understand how to equip families and practitioners with the knowledge and the skills that will strengthen children’s early learning. Together we have listened to what matters to parents and explored with practitioners how we can embed these insights within everyday practice.

This report tells the story of our journey, how the Connecting Through Song research emerged and our findings.

OUR JOURNEY SO FAR..... FROM WONDER WORDS TO CONNECTING THROUGH SONG



Wonder Words – Designing with Parents

In 2018 we gathered the voices of parents engaged in East Belfast Sure Start to hear about their daily routines and the activities that could incorporate a nudge to encourage more chatting, singing, and playing with their young children, in the home or out-and-about in their local community.



Over a 4-week period the information from Belfast Sure Start SLC team Changing Time is Chatting Time was shared with the parents. This resource demonstrates how when you smile, talk, laugh, and sing with your child throughout the day, you are laying foundations on which all future learning will build.

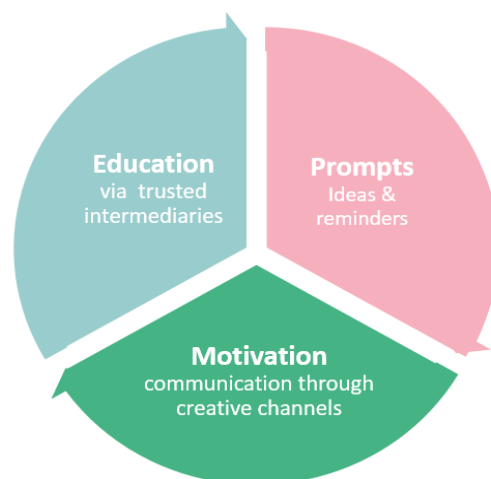
Parents identified the moments which already involve parent-child interactions, and then explored how to incorporate a prompt or 'nudge' to smile, talk, laugh, and sing inside and outside of the home. They explored how these messages and nudges could be communicated to other parents using a range of communication channels.

Working with behavioural insights expertise the parents identified key insights that should be incorporated into behaviour change messaging that will strengthen its success.

1. This Matters to Me
2. Don't just tell me. Show me
3. Don't Judge me
4. There is joy in this
5. Trusted relationships are key



These insights formed the **Wonder Words** model of engagement; **Education** – **Prompts** – **Motivation**



Wonder Words – Designing & Testing

In March 2020 we entered uncertain times as the Corona-virus pandemic resulted in a nation-wide lockdown. Organisations offering support to vulnerable families had to think creatively and re-configure how they reach out and support families. This provided a unique opportunity in East Belfast Sure Start to apply the behaviour change parental insights and explore the impact of this at a practice and family level.

Early years practitioners used the **Wonder Words** parental insights to guide them as they modelled the approach that they wanted parents to adopt. They used digital and social media platforms to encourage parents to smile, chat, laugh, sing, and play with their children through encouraging reading, play and physical activities.

“Parents appreciate and take on board our interaction ideas - reading stories together, making play dough from the simplest recipe, learning something new and most importantly cherish the time they spend together.”

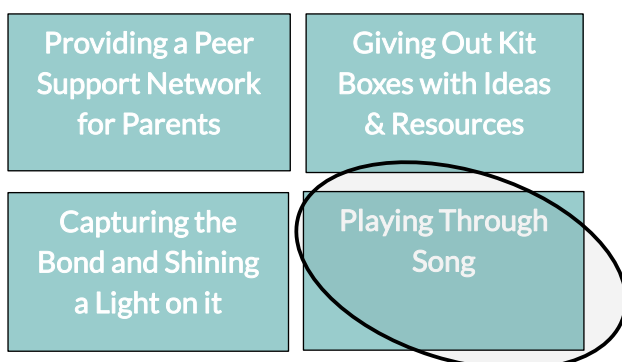
Research with practitioners and parents discovered that when the **Wonder Words** approach was embedded within the design of the interventions aimed at encouraging positive behaviours, the desired behaviour was more likely to be adopted.

Wonder Words – Exploring with Practitioners

A stimulating home environment and responsive and nurturing relationships are key to any child's cognitive, social-emotional and language development. Language development begins in the womb and once a baby is born research shows that they are immediately responsive and ready to communicate.

However, for families living in poverty there are a range of barriers that impact on the way that parents can support their child's early language development. Low income, long working hours, unstable relationships, poor housing, and poor parental mental health are some of the challenges faced by parents living in poverty and for many reasons this can affect the parent's availability for their child.

In 2022 we brought together early years practitioners and behavioural insights expertise to explore how to create the optimum environment that would promote parent and child interactions and strengthen attuned relationships by embedding the learning from **Wonder Words** parental insights and engagement model. This group consisted of Family Support Practitioners and Speech & Language Therapists from across the Belfast Sure Start Centres. Four initial ideas to promote parent and child interaction emerged.



Promoting play through song was felt to have a strong synergy with the **Wonder Words** parental insights. The benefits of singing with your baby and the positive impact on baby brain development is widely recognised. The group decided to take forward playing through song to explore how

singing may be used as a prompt to encourage parent and child interactions.

Connecting Through Song – Co-Designing with Practitioners & Testing with Families

Focusing on singing through play enabled an opportunity to 'zoom' into the 'sing' element of the Changing Time is Chatting Time and Anytime is Chatting Time – **Smile Talk Laugh Sing** and explore the enablers to embedding this positive behaviour.

The Experts by Experience group focused on:

- Co-designing the research.
- Exploring an approach to strengthen the parent and child bond through singing.

Singing is embedded within Sure Start practice to help children learn new things, encourage specific behaviours like tooth brushing or hand washing, create a sense of fun and to signify it's time for home.

The research group identified opportunities to **strengthen** this practice, link the benefits of singing to children's early **baby brain development** and design **prompts** that would encourage this intentional behaviour with parents.

Not everyone is comfortable with singing. Building the confidence of the early years practitioners and the parents to sing was a core feature within the research design.

Strengthening Practice

- A workshop for Practitioners was developed blending Speech & Language and Music Therapy practice and theory.

Baby Brain Development

- Key messages were intentionally woven into everyday practice and communicated to parents in settings.

Prompts

- Modelling singing in Sure Start settings and video prompts to embed the behaviour.

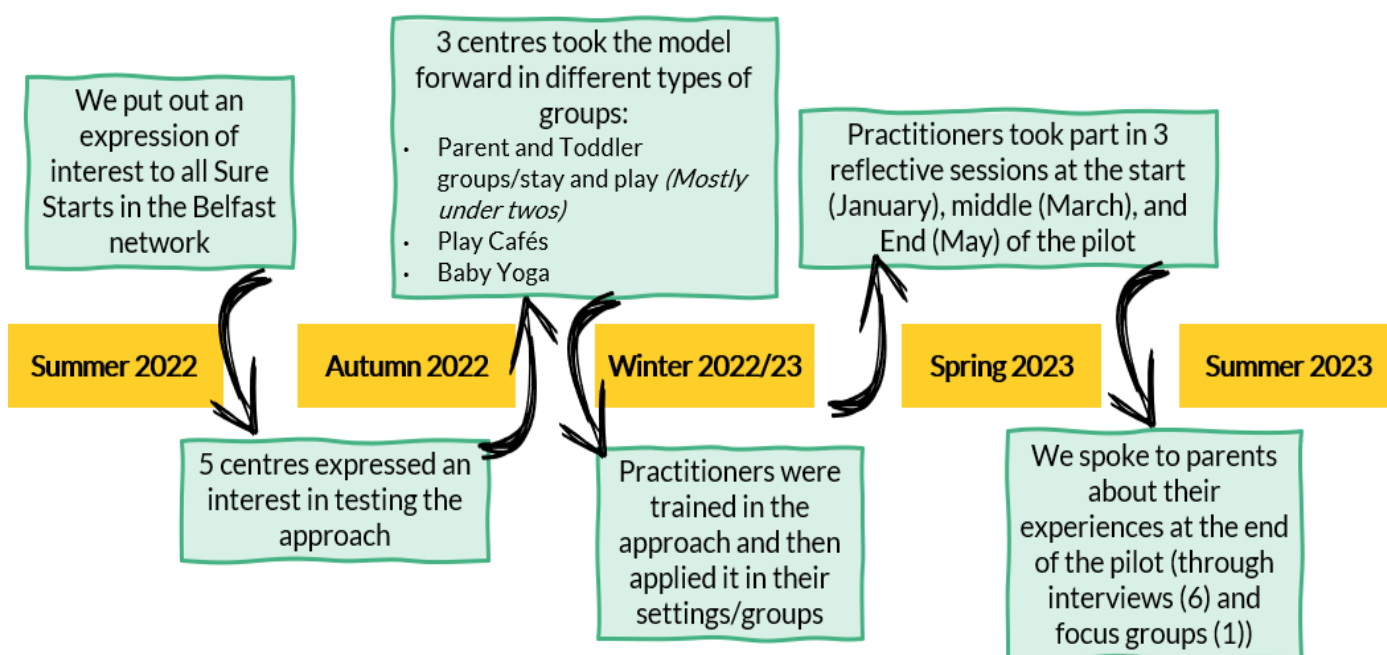
Connecting Through Song – Evaluation

Throughout the testing with families, we wanted to gather the views of parents and practitioners to understand whether the ‘Connecting through Song’ model was effective. We were particularly interested in answering four questions:

1. Did **practitioners** felt better able to **support** parents to sing with their child(ren) and make up songs?
2. Whether **parents** felt better able to sing with their child(ren) and make up songs?
3. Do **parents and practitioners** feel this has helped parents to build **more attuned relationships** with their child(ren)?
4. Which bits of the model **helped or hindered** parents and practitioners?

All of this helps us to determine whether this model is sustainable and useful in the future.

The Methodology



The Connecting Through Song workshop was delivered to early years practitioners who lead parent and child programmes or groups. 21 practitioners across 9 Sure Starts attended the workshop with 3 Sure Starts and 7 practitioners agreeing to participate in the research test phase.

Practitioners engaging in the research organically wove the key learnings and baby brain development messages from the workshop into their parent and child programmes including Stay and Play, Baby Yoga and Parent and Child Play Cafes.

What we were testing...	
Acceptability	Do parents and practitioners like it?
Feasibility	Can it be carried out in the setting?
Transferability	Is it likely to work in other settings too?
Sustainability	Is it likely to keep working outside the initial pilot?

Singing, encouraging singing, the benefits of singing and the making up of songs was embedded into everyday practice. Practitioners met to share reflections of their practice, their observations within their settings and explore how to encourage parents to sing with their children beyond Sure Start.

To understand if the model enabled and encouraged parents to sing with their children, we undertook 6 parent interviews and 1 parent focus group. In the following section we will share the insights from the practitioners and the parents.

Practitioner Insights

Practitioners told us.....

- They liked it because the parents and children liked it.
- They felt more knowledgeable and equipped to embed singing in practice.
- They felt more motivated to sing in their practice.

The practitioners described how they liked the approach of naturally weaving singing into everyday practice as opposed to delivering a bespoke singing programme to their groups. They could see the impact this was having on the parents and how they were taking the lead in singing more during the sessions.

“I feel that they are singing more in my group, with the babies especially actually it’s not just singing more in the singing session but also throughout. They would have let me sing more but now they are singing a lot more.”



Following the workshop practitioners shared how they were more intentional with their messaging in their parent and child groups. Embedding the educational element of the ‘why’ we sing with our

babies and toddlers and the importance of this became a significant part of the session whereby it may not have been previously.

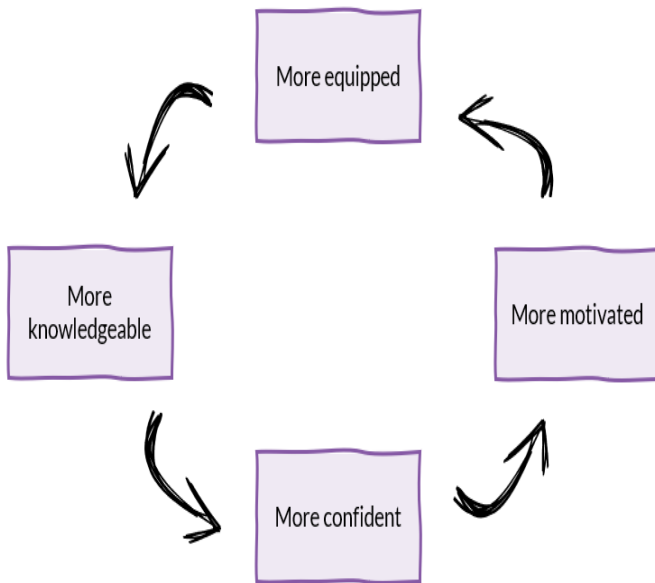
“Now following the training, I am not just delivering the programme. I am spending more time explaining rationale behind the programme. I’m explaining the why we do sing, highlighting the science behind the programme. Especially the non-verbal cues that help highlight that speech and language developments are coming through with the children.”

“We talk a lot about the importance of singing and brain development and go right into it. I think, obviously the parents are so busy that they don’t always take it all in. But if you capture it in a picture and you talk about it and you repeat it and it’s the same thing they notice it and I think it means more.”

Practitioners told us how they felt more motivated to build singing into their practice. In some ways feeling more knowledgeable built their sense of confidence enabling them to feel more equipped. Feeling more equipped enabled them to feel more motivated.

“We always ended with a song, to create an ending to the session and to wrap it up. In autumn term it was a new group and the singing at the end hadn’t been happening, as people were leaving in dribs and drabs. But after the training I was motivated to do more songs, not just at the end of sessions.”

Re-enforcing elements.....



“I think I have more experience now as a worker and I have more confidence like I would probably encourage parents to sing more with the bump.”

What works.....the Power of vulnerability!

Practitioners shared their key insights into what works is supporting parents to feel more relaxed and comfortable with singing in front of others.

“Using your own vulnerability helps to develop common ground with parents.”

“Not being able to sing is not a barrier as it makes you more real to some parents.”

“Sharing that you might feel anxious or nervous is a good grounding so that you are more aware of the anxiety that the parents are feeling.”

Parental Insights

Parents told us.....

- They liked it because they could see the joy in it.
- They felt motivated to sing, they could see how this helped them and their babies.
- Their confidence grew to sing in Sure Start, at home and outside.
- They felt more equipped to sing to their babies and toddlers.

Parents shared how joyful they felt when they could see how happy their children were when they were singing with them. This was one of the key motivational insights that emerged from the Wonder Words research. When parents feel and see joy, they are more likely to adopt the behaviour.

“It makes me feel very good ... because when I sing song, he is happy. So, I am very excited.”



“Yeah, every morning ... me and [son] go to the mirror in the bedroom and sing the song ... Just because he can see himself and see me and we'll just be singing.”

Parents described how singing wasn't something they did naturally and not something they were comfortable doing in front of others, including their partners.

"Yeah, and you know, everybody needs singing together it's given me definitely the confidence to do it then in front of other people. Whereas before whereas my husband had never really even heard me sing. Because I just don't do you know?"

Singing in the Sure Start setting enabled parents to build their confidence to begin singing in their homes and out and about in their communities.

"And I would have been a bit reticent, I guess to sing in front of other people. Whereas now if he's getting upset, I'll sing to him in the park. I don't care who hears me."

Having the knowledge and knowing the benefits of singing to their children inspired and motivated them to embrace singing as a way of supporting their children's early language, social and emotional development.



"I definitely know more about it [the value of singing] ... but I didn't know until I started coming to these groups like, how it's ... important for language development and, like, emotional connection and stuff as well."

Parents shared how they are using singing as a strategy to help them support their child during the tricky moments. Singing also had a positive impact on the parent during these moments reducing feelings of being overwhelmed.

"She hates getting ready like I mean hates it! To the point where she sits and that's a protest. So, I find when I sing a song that she likes it ... not all the time ... But it helps me to not get overwhelmed with the stress of it."

Tricky times were made less stressful through singing. Parents sang to sooth their babies and keep them calm at a time when they may get upset.

"So, they're like watching you singing so actually being calm so I can get the bum changed without them going nuts."

"Sometimes she was crying a lot when I sang to her - like it's like a just relaxed do you know what I mean? Deep breath, sings a wee song and its fine."

Tuning into your baby's needs, being present and soothing your child are some of the behaviours that create a strong parent and child bond. Parents described using singing to support with their child's transitions in special moments like breast feeding.

"I've also found for like, if you're sort of like weaning away from breastfeeding her and things, or, like, I was just gonna start dropping her night feed so instead of feeding her I would sing to her then to as well, just to see her back to sleep."

Summary

Like the practitioners, the parents felt more knowledgeable on the benefits of singing to their children which in turn enabled them to feel more equipped, confident, and motivated to sing.

Seeing the joy this brought to their children and how singing could be used as a strategy to reduce parent and child stress levels acted as a strong motivator to sustain the behaviour in the Sure Start setting, in the home and in the community.

Acceptability – Do Parents and Practitioners Like It?

Yes – parents and practitioners liked the approach. Practitioners were able to see how it had a positive impact on parents and children which motivated them further to embed the approach.

Parents were able to experience the joy of seeing how their children were responding. They could see the benefits of singing as a strategy to support their child's early development, positive behaviours and reduce parental stress.

Feasibility – Can it be Carried Out in a Setting?

Yes – practitioners wove singing within their practice as an element of existing programmes such as baby yoga, play cafes and stay and play sessions rather than a stand-alone programme. The training received through the workshop was a key feature that enabled practitioners to feel equipped and confident to apply the model in practice.

Transferability – Is it Likely to Work in Other Settings Too?

Findings would suggest that the model is transferable. The support of the Sure Start leadership in each Centre, the workshop training and the willingness of practitioners are key elements that strengthen the successful implementation of the approach. Providing the knowledge and equipping practitioners with the

skills must be embedded within the practitioner workforce for optimum success.

Sustainability – Is it Likely to Keep Working Outside of the Initial Pilot?

Practitioners from 9 Sure Start Centres attended the Connecting Through Song workshop and were encouraged to implement their learning within their everyday practice. Each Centre Co-ordinator and Team Leads were encouraged to share their observations through tabletop discussion format.

“What have you done to my Centre? Everyone is singing!”

What Supports Sustainability?

Embedding the culture within the setting:

- Building trusted relationships with the parents in the groups.
- Being inclusive, sharing the message children learn in different ways.
- Encourage the behavior, shine a light on the special moments.
- Be authentic, it helps parents when you show your own vulnerability.

Equipping the practitioners with the knowledge and the tools to encourage parents to sing:

- Intentionally linking singing to baby brain development.
- Providing a bespoke workshop for practitioners on the benefits of singing for children and parents.
- Develop the tools that motivate the parents to sing to their babies. Capture moments on camera, share key messages and modelling videos.

Conclusion

The Connecting Through Song model is a relatively low cost approach which offers an opportunity to enhance the parent and child connection through song. The approach combines the expertise of music therapy, speech and language and family support.

The Sure Start practitioners already embrace song within their practice, however the research highlighted that there is a need to make this more intentional. There is an opportunity to increase parental awareness, and confidence in the benefits of singing with their babies and toddlers.

Not everyone feels comfortable with singing out loud, in group settings, at home or in public spaces. Both parents and practitioners talked openly about the need to build their confidence and skills to do this.

The feeling of joy is a strong motivational driver to embedding the behaviour. Practitioners expressed a desire to continue the practice when they could see the joy this brought to children and families. In turn, parents expressed an increased motivation to sing with their children when they could see how much they loved it. The knowledge that they were actively supporting their child's early development and how they could use song to help with tricky moments was a strong motivator.

Recommendation

The Connecting Through Song model presents an opportunity to equip the practitioners with the tools and confidence to weave singing within their everyday practice. In turn this has the potential to encourage parents to sing more with their children at home and in their communities.

The research findings suggest:

- Offering the Connecting Through Song Workshop to Sure Start teams as part of their ongoing learning and development
- Embedding the workshop within the Changing Time is Chatting Time and Anytime Time is Chatting Time series **Smile – Talk- Laugh – Sing**
- Further research into the testing and development of prompts that encourage the parents to sing at home and in the community

Acknowledgement

We would like to recognise and thank the parents, babies, toddlers and practitioners who whole heartedly embraced the Connecting Through Song research. Thank you for sharing your vulnerabilities and valuable insights which are the key to understanding the power of singing and the wonderful parent and child bonding moments that happen by connecting through song.

We would like to commend the leadership within the Sure Start Centres, their dedication and passion to finding new and creative ways to nurture the child and parent relationship, championing the importance of early baby brain development and enabling parents to play an active role in laying the foundations for their children's future life outcomes.

Finally we would like to recognise and commend the skills and expertise of Anne McKee, Belfast Regional SLT Sure Start (retired), Karen Diamond, Music Therapist and founder of Resilient Rhythms, Seana Kerr, Belfast Regional SLT Sure Start, and those practitioners who formed the Expert by Experience Group throughout the research. Their knowledge, energy, passion and dedication to making life better for our children and families is truly inspirational.



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