



# DADS ROCK PILOT

Summary Report (November 2023)

“These sessions are really important for the families that take part and we have such a mix of backgrounds and experiences. We’ve had some Dads come along that have never been left alone with their babies or young children before, some struggling with their own mental health and they clearly feel out of their depth.

But this is where the music and structure of the sessions come in. You can see overtime how the Dads see how the activities really engage the children and they come back and tell us about the musical things they have done at home”.

*Partner*

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## Introduction

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Dads Rock is an early years community music programme for dads with young children, led by Evolve Music. "Dads Rock" is delivered in the form of child-led musical play sessions that take place in public spaces, such as community centres, libraries, or health settings. Each session lasts around one and a half hours and is led by two highly skilled early years music professionals.

Evolve Music states that the Dads Rock programme is inclusively designed to ensure families with experience of health, developmental, economical, or social challenges can most benefit from them. Dads Rock sessions enable parents to build on their innate parenting abilities, gain confidence in parenting, and connect with other parents through musical play and singing.

Evolve Music started Dads Rock sessions in April 2021 with three sessions in Bristol, Bath and Frome. This led to a partnership bid with Bluebell Care to Youth Music for funding for a more in-depth pilot lasting one year. Due to unforeseen circumstances, Bluebell Care was not able to realise this with Evolve Music, and in 2022, Evolve Music launched the project independently of them.

Further funding from Arts Council England and the Big Lottery was secured in July 2023, enabling Evolve Music to sustain Dads Rock activity in Bath and Radstock and roll out new Dads Rock hubs in Frome and Worle from September 2023.

This report incorporates data captured during Dads Rock activities that took place within this timeframe. It has been prepared by Evolve Music and includes data collected and analysed by external evaluator Mary Schwatz as part of an end-of-grant monitoring and evaluation process for Youth Music.

## Evaluation process

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From September 2022 to November 2023, the following data was collected.

Music leaders completed a plan and monitoring form to record activities and reflect on each session. During the planning stage, music leaders were encouraged to ask:

- What are your session aims?
- What did you notice from the previous session?
- Any themes, special events, culturally specific information, or particular interests of participants to include as part of the session?
- How will you create an environment that is warm, welcoming, safe, creative, and facilitates play?
- Can you use a combination of familiar and favourite resources, alongside some new and unusual resources to keep everyone engaged?
- Can you incorporate themes or instruments that enable participants to learn about the world around them?
- Do you have all the instruments, resources, or equipment you need?

Reflections:

- What went well? Any challenges?
- Anything to change for next time?
- Notes on any particular moments or issues? Individual needs, group dynamics, any success or 'magic moments.'
- Any specific links to project aims/outcomes?
- Anything you need to share with the core team, such as signposting, safeguarding, venue challenges, additional equipment needed?
- What's next?

This enabled music leaders to report and reflect on both the ongoing responsive development of their delivery and changes observed in the participating children and Dads.

Music leaders also took part in Zoom ‘wash-up meetings’ which positively supported the sharing of reflections across delivery settings.

A Google Survey form was also completed by Dads for each term. The total of 36 responses represented 18% of all 200 participating Dads and just under 54% of the 67 Dads with sustained engagement (i.e. participation in 3+ sessions), showing a very good response rate.

In July 2023, the External Evaluator got in touch with four Dads who had indicated on the Survey form they would be happy to be contacted and had also given their contact details. All Dads responded: one chose to provide further feedback to emailed questions, three chose to have a telephone conversation. Two of these conversations took place, with the Evaluator unable to talk with the third, despite several attempts to ring them following the original booked time. Enabling Dads to have the opportunity to give feedback at greater length than the Google form and to an independent person was positive in supporting them to share full and open reflections. Dads’ availability for a telephone call given busy work and caring lives was a limitation. The External Evaluator also attended part of a Dads Rock Music Leaders Skill Sharing Day held in July 2023 at which project approaches and music facilitation practices were discussed and shared.

The data captured above was thematically organised to enable Evolve Music to understand the benefits to the child, the benefits to the caregiver and the benefits to their relationship. Due to the increasing demand for early years work, the final section of this report touches on the policy context for this work to ensure the work can be sustained and developed over future years.

## Dads Rock timeline and numbers

July - August 2022	Bluebell Care withdraws from the project. Partnership agreements made with Bristol Beacon, Hope House Surgery and Bath Children and Family Centre to host and refer families to sessions. A team of 6 early years music leaders recruited and inducted into the programme. Significant items of early years music equipment purchased for 3 host sites. Programme marketed and launched through digital channels.
September - December 2022	28 free early years music sessions take place on a Saturday morning in Southmead, Radstock and Bath. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 125 incidences of families participating</li> <li>- 48 families attended more than 3 times <sup>1</sup></li> </ul>
January - April 2023	27 free early years music sessions take place on a Saturday morning in Southmead, Radstock and Bath. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 226 incidences of families participating</li> <li>- 50 families attended more than 3 times</li> </ul>
April - July 2023	12 free early years music sessions take place on a Saturday morning in Radstock and Bath. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 85 incidences of families participating</li> <li>- 18 families attended more than 3 times</li> </ul>
July 2023	Dads Rock Music Leaders Skills Sharing Day takes place at Bristol Beacon.
September 2023	Funding from Reaching Communities and Arts Council England secured to continue and extend Dads Rock to Bath, Worle, and Frome.

<sup>1</sup> Evolve Music classes sustained engagement as those attending more than 3 sessions.

## What was included in a Dads Rock session?

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“I really enjoy seeing my children grow more confident and get more involved’ *Dads Rock Participant*

Evolve Music uses a child-initiated, adult-responsive approach to early years music-making and creates environments in which imaginative sound exploration can happen.

Dads Rock sessions are imaginative, spontaneous, and dynamic. While the value of more traditional community music approaches is understood, for example, adult-led singalongs, Evolve Music believes the real impacts and benefits lay in creating play spaces and musical environments where participants' natural musicality and creativity can be explored. Depending on the context, Dads Rock sessions included some or all of the following:

- Setting up fun, creative and sometimes themed musical play spaces
- Familiar transition songs such as the ‘Hello’ and ‘Goodbye’ songs
- Opportunities for children to embody their music experiences through dance, movement, actions.
- Changing the words to familiar tunes e.g. popular music or nursery rhymes.
- A cup of tea and a chat
- Using a range of sensory resources such as scarves, bubbles
- Group singing
- Asking Dads to choose and share their favourite lullaby, nursery, track
- Talking to Dads about music, their experiences, music and early childhood.
- Musical storytelling using bokos, puppets or other resources
- Improvising new stories and tunes as a group
- Jam sessions with children using different beats
- Introduction of new instruments, such as world instruments
- Making instruments out of household items

Dads Rock sessions are designed with the Early Years Foundation Stage goals in mind, in particular:

- **Communication and Language:** Sound and music exploration is at the heart of Dads Rock sessions. Children are encouraged to listen and respond musically to new sounds, rhythms, and patterns and to respond to them with their voice or with musical instruments.
- **Personal, Social, and Emotional Development:** The group improvisation, and games such as ‘call and response’ or ‘in the round’ that happen during Dads Rock sessions require young children to listen and show an awareness of the actions and activities of those around them.
- **Physical Development:** Dads Rock sessions encourage young children to move in time to the music and explore the musical play spaces. While there is usually a component of circle time and group singing, allowing children time for free play and to respond physically through movement and dance is equally as important as it develops space awareness, balance, and coordination.
- **Expressive Arts & Design:** Musical improvisation activities, enabling children to embody their music experience, changing the words to familiar tunes to reflect children’s experiences.
- **Understanding of the World:** Natural world themes, sustainability themes, and introducing a weekly world instrument are just some of the ways in which Dads Rock sessions develop young children’s understanding of the world.

However they are not codified against these early years goals. Music leaders use a reflexive and reflective approach, meeting participants ‘where they are at’ on the day and changing session plans as needed. The most important element of a Dads Rock session is that they meet the needs of those taking part, that the children and Dads have fun through music, and make connections.



## Outcome: supporting the personal, social and emotional wellbeing of babies and young children

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Evolve Music has adopted a thoughtful and evidence-based approach to its early years music sessions, and Dads Rock activities are underpinned by research into the role music-making and sound exploration play in early childhood development. It is well-established that a developing foetus can discriminate sounds in the womb from 22 weeks gestation, and that early sound discrimination aids the development of sound-based communication skills in early childhood <sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, communication skills in early childhood provide the foundations for the personal, social, and emotional development and well-being of young children. Music-making and sound exploration activities that help develop these skills include playing and exploring timing, pulse, voice timbre, gesture, and rhythm.

In many of the reflective notes from music leaders, changes in the confidence levels of young children and their participation in activities were noticed from the outset

‘Some of the children really came out of their shell as the session progressed (started out quieter and then made suggestions and shared their ideas by the end)’.

‘A was shy to begin but warmed up and welcomed some time at the beginning and reading a book. She didn’t want to leave at the end!’

*Music Leader Monitoring Form*

In another setting, near to the end of the term the Music Leaders noted,

‘The group feels confident, settled and engaged. Everyone knows what to expect, we can stretch at various points too, from a place of feeling secure.’

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<sup>2</sup>

Communicative musicality: sound, pulse and rhythm in music and language. (Blackburn, S. 2016)  
<https://bcuassets.blob.core.windows.net/docs/communicative-musicality-report-130987955021412745.pdf>

Musically, the kids explore more regular beats and patterns, and hear them singing more....’

*Music Leader Monitoring Form*

Dads reported their children had developed in many ways and in particular their confidence, emotional regulation, communication and social interaction. In terms of sensory development, more focused listening and increased exploration through the body and touch were also noted. One Dad reflected:

‘My child's confidence has developed significantly from when they first attended to now, for example, often they now speak more now in public or when out in groups, whereas previously were very shy...their ability to interact with other children and movement has developed as well to include higher levels of concentration and understanding.’

*Dads Rock participant*

Dads Rock also provided a unique space for young children to develop their confidence in communicating with adults who were not their caregivers,

‘I found my child really developing a relationship with [the Music Leaders], always saying hello and waving goodbye’.

*Dads Rock participant*

Another Dad reported how their child started to talk about music after the session, singing songs and tapping on things—a great example of how musicality started to be not limited to formal music-making or professional musicians but as an inherent aspect of play and development.

## Outcome: supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of dads/father figures

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1 in 10 Dads experience depression related to pregnancy and birth, and this can be in addition to supporting partners who are experiencing mental health difficulties. As a new Dad, supporting both partner and baby, whilst managing responsibilities, can be stressful and overwhelming, yet research shows that only 36% of referrals to specialist services for the treatment of depression and anxiety are men. Children may also experience insecure attachment and difficulty regulating emotions due to the lack of emotional availability displayed by depressed parents.

Music can play a valuable role in supporting mental health and well-being<sup>3</sup>. It can stimulate emotional and aesthetic responses, develop creative, technical, social and vocational skills, improve expression, communication, confidence and self-esteem, and facilitate positive changes in behaviour and wellbeing.

Within each Dads Rock session there is a space for Dads to connect through music, conversation and a hot drink. Similar to the way some of the young children take time to build their confidence to take part in sessions, so do some of the Dads,

‘noticing dads becoming more comfortable, relaxing and socialising more with other dads and becoming more confident - also in their baby interaction!’

‘...witnessed lots of musical progression from children and an improvement in confidence in dads and enjoyed observing them chatting. He had a lovely chat about outdoor wear with one dad who became very enthusiastic about the conversation and said it must be so nice to talk about things other than children / work etc’.

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<sup>3</sup> Damsgaard J.B., Jensen A. Music Activities and Mental Health Recovery: Service Users’ Perspectives Presented in the CHIME Framework. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health*. 2021;18:6638. doi: 10.3390/ijerph18126638.

‘Dads were chatting to one-another much more and laughing at kids' reactions during the session’

*Music Leader Monitoring Forms*

However other Dads quickly share their experiences and challenges with each other and the music leaders,

‘We had a new chap M\*\*\* , who opened up to me very quickly in conversations about hard times he is going through. He was referred to Dads Rock by his GP. He is keen to come back.’

*Music Leader Monitoring Form*

On a couple of occasions specific disclosures about health, family-life, work challenges and unemployment were shared with music leaders. Local signposting information was made available via a shared drive and a partnership arrangement around referrals with Dad Matters (Home-start West Somerset) ensured Music Leaders were able to deal with concerns or disclosures effectively and the Designated Safeguarding Lead made 2 referrals to services during the course of the pilot project.

Music leaders were also trained in trauma-informed practice in November 2022 to develop their understanding and to support them in dealing with concerns and issues as they arose.

‘Music leaders were very concerned about one of the Dads on Saturday and felt he is really struggling and needs urgent support. They reported he stayed after the session for a long time. The music leaders signposted the Dad to the GP. This was reported to me straight after the session and I had a number of conversations with the Dad over the phone on the

Saturday and Sunday afternoon. He consented to me making an urgent referral to Dad Matters and by Monday one of the case workers had made contact with him and started the ball rolling'

*Designated safeguarding lead report*

Whilst the majority of activity for this pilot was funded by Youth Music (who resources are directed to the under 25's), Dads were encouraged during sessions to sing and act as positive role models for their young children as part of the overall approach to the sessions,

'We had lots of singing from dads today, which was great! And some from children too! Lee was very enthusiastic and happy to join in singing which I think perhaps prompted other dads which was great! Little H was a keen vocalist also!'

*Music Leader Monitoring Form*

## Outcome: supporting bonding and attachment between dads and their young children

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“... during the session it was a struggle but at home that evening my daughter loved playing it.. so even when activities don't work or are a bit challenging, sometimes that's ok because we have learnt something new and can do it again at home..” *Dads Rock participant*

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All the Dads giving feedback to the External Evaluator described how they were supporting music making at home much more as a result of the project. The survey also showed that 81% were also learning new things (creative exercises and approaches) that they were trying at home,

‘We now often do more activities at home which are music related, for example, musical statues to the songs which they have at Dads Rock. Also we often have music on the Alexa now everyday, with our daughter doing dancing. Also we try to use everyday objects now to see what sounds they make, for example, items from the kitchen.’

*Dads Rock participant*

The musical and creative nature of the session was highly appreciated. 61% of Dads attending had never or rarely used musical instruments or sound to play with their young children at home, and were also not aware of the early childhood development benefits of this approach.

Evidence of getting the whole family involved in music-making was also found through informal anecdotes participants shared with music leaders during sessions,

“S said they went on holiday recently and it was chucking it down so they played 'Dads Rock'. He was Magic Luke, F made his Mum be me and they made their own instruments and played all the classics”

*Music Leader WhatsApp Group*

Music Leaders were able not just to model music activities which were ‘*replicated at home*’ (Dad) but also encourage an open approach,

‘B had an interesting conversation with one Dad (who is a musician), reassuring him that he doesn’t need to follow a ‘right’ way of playing music and it is fine to make up words, verses, improvise etc (rather than try and remember all the words/’right’ music). He was perhaps a little worried about doing music ‘wrong’, so wasn’t doing as much with his daughter. I hope they will have gained a sense of free musical exploration and the enjoyment of just making things up.’

*Music Leader Monitoring Form*

Another Music Leader described how Dads were increasingly bringing ideas and resources into sessions. Music leaders also observed increased child/baby led interactions during sessions,

‘The dads were once again more supportive and nurturing. They were great with the songs that involved holding and swinging their babies. Lots of supportive language when exploring the instruments eg ‘what sound does this make?’ and ‘can you make it make a noise?’.

‘More child-led dad and baby interaction today which was great’.

*Music Leader Monitoring Form*

## Quality & Inclusivity

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In terms of quality, 100% of Dads rate Evolve Music's early years music professionals as 'excellent' or 'very good', and all would refer Dads Rock to a friend. Dads recognised how significant their musical skills and passion; genuine interest in young children and adult carers; ability to create a supportive, creative and inclusive '*warm and welcoming*' environment; and overall authenticity were to the project's success.

There was clear evidence of quality improvement strategies through mutual peer learning between paired 'more' and 'less' experienced music leaders and this enhanced the reflective process and also had the wider benefit of building capacity within the wider early years music sector. For instance, one more experienced Leader reported:

'B said he is feeling more relaxed, confident and able to engage better - which is great! He said this is still work in progress but it is fantastic he is feeling more confident in week 2!'

### *Music Leader Monitoring Form*

Reflective practice also helped develop the inclusivity and relevance of the sessions. Planning and monitoring forms recorded this, and included many '*We did this, it didn't quite work, we'll do it like this next time...that worked better*' examples, with careful attention to how the physical environment (space, layout, refreshment availability etc.) was impacting on participants' experiences as well as the actual musical activities.

In terms of inclusivity, the pilot saw 32% of Dads have been referred to the programme by service providers, the remaining either found out about the programme through social media or saw a poster in a local public space or heard about it through word of mouth. Limited demographic data was available on Dads



but there was evidence that the activities had engaged Dads from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and journey's to parenthood.

Dads Rock also attracted families with young children who were starting to notice diagnosed or undiagnosed disability or neurodiversity and music leaders adapted activities to meet their needs, ensuring they could fully take part,

'M is a new adopted child - been with new dad for just 5 weeks! She found the session challenging at times and cried a bit but also some parts she enjoyed and it was good to let dads know they can join or play as much as they want. M is non-verbal as yet so signing could help. We told J to let us know ahead of next session if he finds any songs M really likes so we can do those to help her settle'

'A has hearing aids and possibly special needs also? He participated well!'

#### *Music Leader Monitoring Form*

Providing an inclusive offer is of clear importance to Evolve Music. At the Skills Sharing Day, there was extensive discussion about, and sharing of, practices and consideration of ethics, cultural relevance and diversity and inclusion (content and delivery). Music leaders have requested Makaton training be made available to them. Evolve Music is exploring whether Mental Health First Aid training might also be useful alongside Trauma-informed practice training.

There has also been discussion between project and programme managers about the use of the term 'dads' and whether this was excluding children and families without father figures in their lives, adoptive families and/or those in same sex relationships.

## Discussion and the policy context for Dads Rock

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Dads Rock offers a unique space for Dads to develop alternative and positive ways of communicating with their children, which improves children's sense of well-being and their ability to interact with their peers, caregivers, and adults who are not their caregivers. Many of the musical activities emulate the natural patterns of communication that are crucial for building the bonds and connection for young children to develop in line with the personal, social, and emotional development goals as outlined in the Early Years Foundation Framework.

There was evidence that Dads Rock has also provided early intervention for families, and in particular, father-figures who appear to be needing a little extra support. Just under one-third of families have been referred to the pilot project by GPs, health visitors, and children's centres. Effective signposting and safeguarding procedures ensured families that did present did not 'slip through the net' and were able to access support either from peers or other, more targeted mental health and well-being services.

The development of communication and language skills, and its symbiotic relationship with well-being in childhood and among caregivers, is at the heart of the Dads Rock programme. Dads spoke of observing improved confidence and connection in and between them and their young children. It is also important to note the learning and legacy of these sessions, with more music-making and sound exploration taking place at home as a result of them taking part in these activities. Early intervention and communication and language skill development are cited as the critical components to babies and young children getting a 'healthy start for life' in The Early Years Healthy Development Review Report issued by the Department of Health, with the Dads Rock program making a clear positive contribution to this agenda.

Core participant groups had become well-established in some locations, in particular, Bath. This could be due to the higher density of population, including families with young children in Bath, and/or the fact that urban families are more likely to seek out and attend recreational activities for young children.



The skill set and understanding of early years music among the music leader workforce were exceptional. This high-level starting point was further supported by time and space given for reflection and development and ensured sessions held a careful balance of group activity, free play spaces, and social time for caregivers.

However, and most importantly, Dads Rock sessions are a unique and rare space for Dads (and male caregivers) to bond with their babies, young children, and each other.

## Recommendations for future delivery

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If their strategic objective of sustaining and extending Dads Rock activity is to be achieved, careful thought will need to go into the recruitment and development of high quality music leaders who will be able to meet this demand on Saturday mornings.

Future evaluation strategies should include gathering of baseline information, to enable more robust 'distance travelled' data possible.

The scheduling of sessions as monthly had an impact on attendance rates in Radstock and more frequent sessions would be beneficial to the local area.

The training needs of the music leader workforce should be continued to be reviewed and resourced.