

Creativity with care during COVID-19

Paul Sullivan

Abstract

The importance of music and creativity in promoting the social development and wellbeing of children and young people is well documented. For children and young people with care experience, music can build resilience, help to heal trauma and support the development of supportive relationships; however, despite these myriad benefits, significant challenges remain that prevent care experienced children and young people's access to creativity. This article explores the impact of these challenges, many of which are being exacerbated by COVID-19; and, shines a light on one initiative 'Musicares' that is helping to overcome these challenges in Scotland.

Keywords

Music, creativity, COVID-19, care, residential care, trauma, hope, potential, education, Scotland

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The importance of creativity and care

The importance of creativity in promoting the social development and wellbeing of children and young people is well documented. In 2016, the Scottish Government published an [Instrumental Music Group report](#), which recognised that: 'Music contributes greatly to young people's mental, social, emotional and physical well-being'. Despite this, a 2019 enquiry by the Scottish Parliament's Education and Skills Committee, [A note of concern: The future of instrumental music tuition in schools](#), highlighted the huge prohibitive cost of music tuition in Scotland.

For children and young people with care experience, music can build resilience and help to heal trauma (Hallam, 2015). CELCIS research '[Creative Consortium: Children and Young people in Residential Care Engagement in Music](#)' has found that music promotes emotional wellbeing, is linked to personal identity and promotes a sense of inclusion and belonging. It also helps build relationships amongst young people, and between young people and their carers.

As well as enjoyment, musical tuition supports children and young people's emotional wellbeing, increases confidence and provides a sense of achievement (Hawthorn, Gracie, & McCue, 2018). [The Independent Care Review](#) in Scotland also recognised the importance of supporting children and young people's creativity. Perhaps most importantly, it is also great fun.

All the evidence confirms the benefits of music for care experienced young people, yet, despite these myriad benefits, there are significant challenges that continue to prevent care experienced children and young people accessing music and creativity. Some of these are cultural or practical, whilst others stem from a systemic lack of continuity, that can be a feature of the lives of too many of the children and young people who are in care. COVID-19 risks exacerbating these existing challenges.

Care experienced children and young people very often do not have the space or opportunities to express their creativity. This can affect their immediate wellbeing, their long-term mental health and their future life chances. It matters

because access to creative outlets and resources to explore creative expression should never be seen as a 'nice to have' or just for those who can afford access. With Scotland working towards the incorporation of the UNCRC into Scots Law, children's right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities is never more important.

Creative opportunities

Opportunities exist, both during COVID-19 and as we come out of the pandemic, to support care experienced children and young people in creativity.

A collaborative [Musicares](#) project run by the charities [Sound Lab](#) and [Music Plus](#) is the first national music project for care experienced young people in Scotland, providing free music tuition, workshops, mentoring and advice for care experienced young people all across the country. This programme offers any type of music or creative tuition, from DJ and sound production, to learning to play the guitar, drums, keyboard, singing/song-writing, music theory, art and anything else that young people might want to learn. With Musicares, we have the ambition to provide a fully national music service for care experienced young people all over Scotland.

The workshops are free and are designed to be flexible and accessible — able to follow the young person if they move home, for example. We can provide the loan of instruments and other technical equipment and the tuition can be one-to-one or group work, removing all possible barriers to engagement.

We have fantastic tutors based all over the country that allow us to reach any community in Scotland. We have the learning from working alongside young people in the first years of the project and building connections with other care partners. Most importantly, we have the ambition to create as many free creative opportunities for young people as we can.

Creativity during COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic put an abrupt end to the many face-to-face workshops Sound Lab hosted under Musicares each week. However, being aware of the

importance of maintaining those supportive relationships, the volunteers have worked tirelessly to create a programme of digital delivery so that young people can continue to take part. The online workshops have boosted the morale of the young people who participate, giving them something to focus on and helping them to feel less cut off from the outside world. COVID-19 has really shown the importance of our work — not just in the creative tuition and technical education, but, perhaps more importantly, in the relationships that many of the young people have built up with their tutors and volunteers. In some cases, our tutor has been the only other supportive relationship these young people have seen each week.

As well as ongoing digital tuition, [weekly tutorials over social media](#) from industry professionals within Scotland's vibrant music scene were introduced. These pre-recorded tutorials come from their bank of specialist tutors, including DJ track mixing, music production on a professional mixing desk, and insights into the song writing process from professional musicians.

Enjoying art made by others, producing a piece of music, learning an instrument or writing a song can provide comfort to people in such uncertain times, and this should not be a privilege given only to those who can easily access it. For care experienced young people, having a trusted adult who is there to support them can make an unbelievable difference to their wellbeing, and this has been particularly important during the last few months. Covid-19 has required us to think creatively about how our Musicares project responds to meet the needs of young people across Scotland. As the public health measures seem likely to be in place for the foreseeable future, so too will our model of providing free online tuition support for any care experienced young person who can benefit.

A call out to carers

Some barriers remain, however. The [Creative Consortium research](#) (Hawthorn, Gracie & McCue, 2018) recognised some of the systemic barriers that prevent children and young people having their creative rights realised.

While children and young people enjoy and value engagement in music activity, their lives have been marked by change and

discontinuity. It is therefore difficult to sustain involvement when children are admitted to residential care and, along with this, often change school. The residential care system is complex in respect of staff cover and rotas, care planning systems and regulations.

Two years on from that research, it can still feel like creativity is not always valued as much as it should be by those working with care experienced young people. This is what we want to see change.

We want to see service managers, carers, advocates, teachers – anyone who has an impact on a child or young person’s life – recognise the value of creativity and acting as a champion for every care experienced young person in Scotland. Creativity should never be for a privileged few: it should be a right for every child and young person.

Musicares is a free resource to bring these benefits to every care experienced young person in Scotland. Please spread the word about the project – make sure that you’ve done everything you can to bring creativity to care experienced young people. Get in touch at thesoundlabglasgow@gmail.com if you would like to learn more.

References

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About the author

Paul Sullivan is Chair of The Sound Lab and Sector Engagement Lead at CELCIS.