



DIVERSITY IN EARLY YEARS PERFORMANCE MAKING

INTRODUCTION

You are in the early days of parenthood. You're finally ready to leave the house and possibly even engage with some culture, do something a bit creative – you've heard it's very important to give children good artistic experiences when they are young.

Think about what kind of art you expect to see – is it colourful, loud, quiet, funny? Is it theatre or music or dance? The world of arts for very young children has vast possibilities but look closer at who is often making this art – women who are juggling the caring responsibilities of their own children.

I meet lots of artists who look and think like me, often parents of small children themselves as I run workshops, make productions and run a venue for babies and toddlers.

These artists are all very talented but I want to be able to programme a broad range of people from lots of different backgrounds in my events and my venue, the Mini Playhouse in Hastings, East Sussex. I want to be able to offer as rich and varied a programme as if I was creating and programming work for an audience of adults.

It seems like there are some barriers to artists taking part in making work for little ones and I would like to open up this world of creation which I have found extremely rewarding and artistically challenging in equal measure.



In Spring 2023 I began an Arts Council funded research project to better understand the artists making performance work for very young children, to improve my skills and to ask artists their perspective on what the problems are and how they could be solved. With our research partner Soundcastle we have thought long and hard about this subject, speaking to dozens of interesting programmers, producers and artists. This report is the result of our artist survey, our broader conversations and some final provocations for change.

We want to challenge all reading this to create an offer of training and funding commissions to make a difference for very young children and families right across England, in whatever way you are able to do.

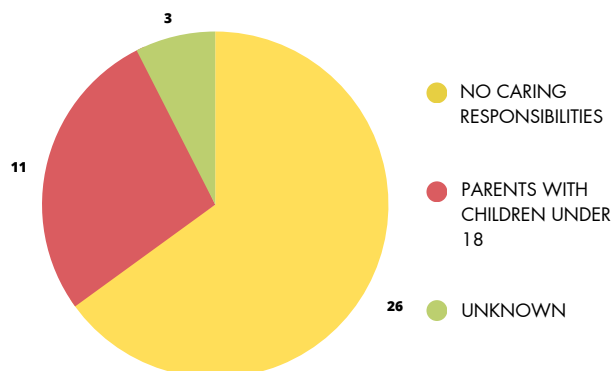
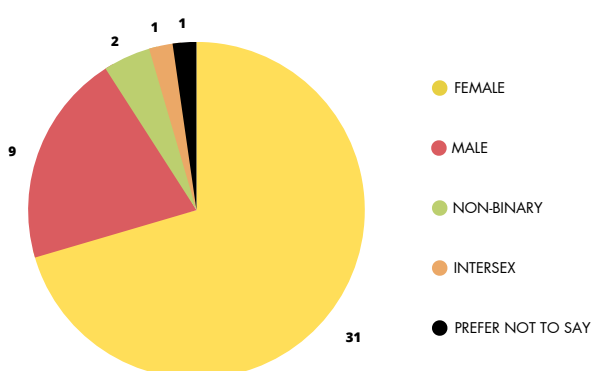
Jessica Cheetham, Spun Glass Theatre

CORE QUESTION

HOW CAN WE WORK TOGETHER ACROSS THE ARTS INDUSTRY TO DIVERSIFY THE LIVE PERFORMANCE WORK AVAILABLE FOR VERY YOUNG CHILDREN AND BABIES?

We asked artists to respond who have not made performance work for very young children. Here is a summary of who responded to our survey:

- **44 people responded in total**
- **The majority were women in midlife, 25 – 59 years old**
- **1 woman was over 65**
- **1 woman was aged between 16 and 24**
- **70% of respondents identified their ethnicity as white British, 14.3% mixed heritage, 11.3% Black heritage, 2.2% Ashkenazi Jewish, 2.2% Hispanic**



KEY THEMES

We surveyed 44 artist practitioners who specifically have not (yet) made work with or for very young children. We asked **‘Why do you think that the artists who make performance work for young children are typically women who have young children themselves?’**

Two core perspectives emerged:

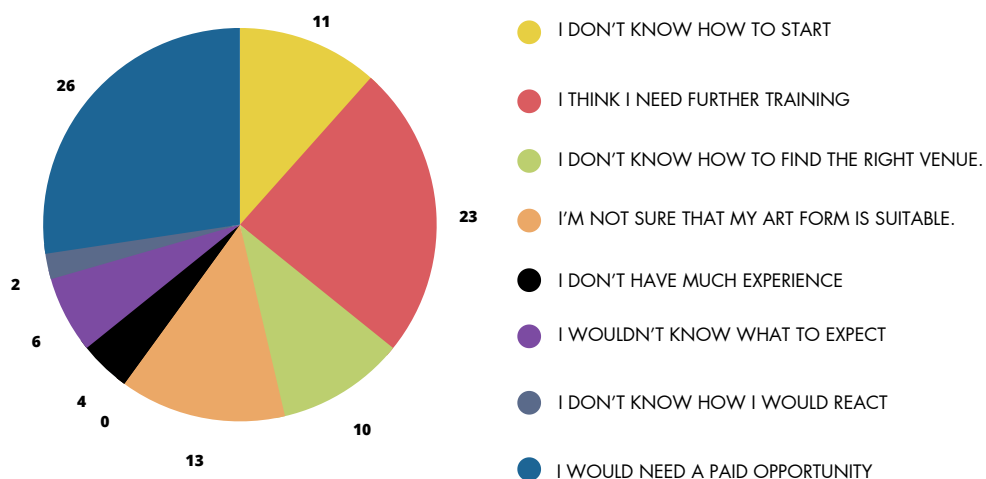
- 1. Parent creatives are using what they have:** Creative carers who still want to make work adapt their work creatively to reflect their living experience. Becoming a parent opens up a new understanding of how the creative arts are presented to young children. Artists see a void in what they want their children to experience and fill the void.
- 2. Patriarchy:** women’s role in society makes work for young children the only option for artists who want to continue to make performance but need to be full time carers with small children.



Three main issues were highlighted by respondents that made make art for very young children less appealing:

- **Lack of status for Early Years arts** and a sense that it's a specialism that removes opportunity to work with other audience groups.
- **Biological Assumptions:** It is assumed that women instinctively can adapt their creativity to and better understand very young children, which excludes men.
- **Lack of resources:** Artists want to be commissioned to make work for very young children. They also want to train but this needs to be funded training.

The dominant ask is for training and paid opportunities.





WHAT'S NEXT?

This is the beginning of a complicated and vital conversation about who our children get to see, hear and create in those crucial first years of life. Please use this data as a conversation starter, a call to train and pay for high quality diverse arts experiences for the next generation – we want to continue this conversation so if it's got you thinking about what action we should take next, please get in touch.

Here are 2 provocations this survey raised for us:

How can the arts industry make performance for very young audiences an equally valued part of a lifetime's creative output?

How can making live performance with and for young children and families be exciting, sustainable and attractive to artists who do not have caring responsibilities themselves?

We also considered:

Contrary to the call to diversify the artists making art for and with very young children, should we be looking at how we can preserve this creative space accessed by parents/women under supported in wider society, ensuring that space is made for Global Majority and LGBTQ+ parents/women?

Tell us what you think:

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