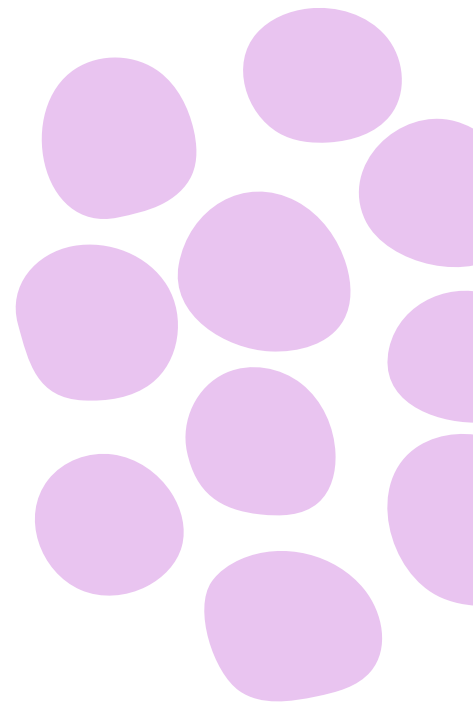
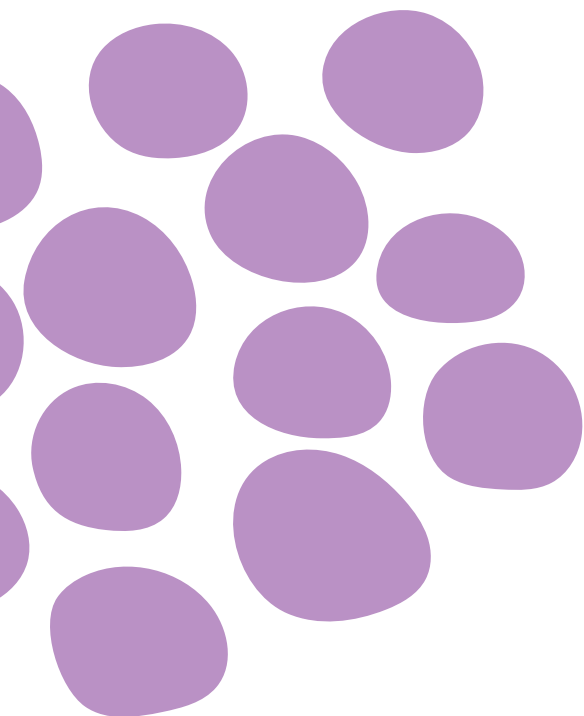


Family Choir



SERVICE EVALUATION
SPRING & SUMMER 2023

SARAH HAMBLBY



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Background

Since 2019, Made with Music (MwM) have been providing singing sessions for mothers in perinatal mental health care and their babies. These sessions have been valuable for improving the mental wellbeing of mothers, as other research has suggested (Sanfilippo et al., 2021). However, recognising a lack of community-based follow up opportunities for mothers and for their families to be involved in singing together, they began the family choir at the perinatal mental health unit in Leeds in 2020. This service evaluation was conducted to address the lack of academically supported research of the family sessions and seeks to explore the experiences of all involved including parents, siblings and staff. It seeks to provide evidence for the effectiveness of these projects and to support the need for access to these follow-up activities beyond the short-term support which is most commonly offered. The following two research questions have been the focus of this service evaluation:

1. What are the benefits of family singing sessions within perinatal mental health care?
2. How does family singing extend mother and baby interventions?

To explore these research questions, parents attending the spring and summer term family choir sessions were asked to complete a survey at the end of each session. This data, supplemented with observation of eight weeks, weekly survey reflections from staff, and three interviews with parents and staff has been analysed. This has revealed clear benefits of family singing in supporting recovery of postnatal depression, particularly concerning a positive influence on individual mental and physical state, improving family connections, and building connections with others.

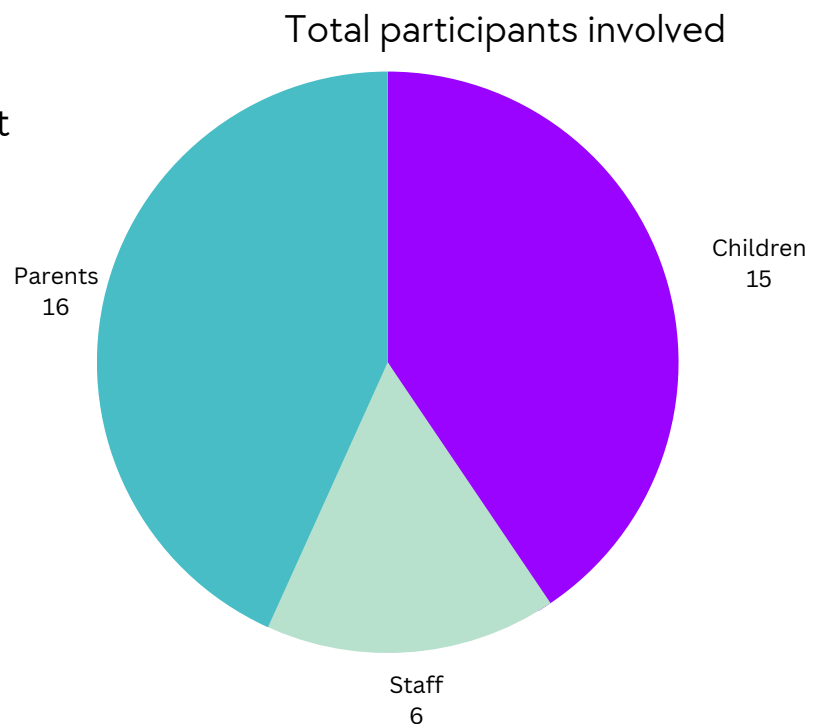
Methods

A self-report research design was used for this service evaluation to capture the experiences of those involved in the family choir. Both the spring and summer terms were included in the evaluation, a total of fifteen weeks, to capture experiences over an extended period of time.

Participants

There were a total of 22 adult participants involved in this service evaluation, with 16 parents, and 6 staff. 15 babies and children were also present and involved in observations (see Figure 1). Each was informed of the aims, methods, and procedure of this research through the participant information sheet, and gave written consent (parental consent for children). Not all participants were present every week.

Figure 1



Surveys

Surveys were completed by those present and were willing to participate at the end of each session. This resulted in 199 surveys being completed over the course of fifteen weeks. The surveys the participants completed differed over the course of the evaluation in order to gain qualitative and quantitative data about their experience without making the surveys too long. Staff and parents also completed separate surveys with targeted questions.

The staff surveys asked the participant to state their role (i.e. session facilitator, occupational therapist, peer support worker, other). They consisted of scale questions about whether their physical or mental states had been impacted, and qualitative questions to focus on the impact the family choir had on them. They were also asked about their perception of how it was impacting the families. This provided a space for them to reflect and suggest improvements for the service.

Similarly, each week parents were presented with the scale questions about whether their physical and mental states had been impacted. At the start and end of both terms, parents were asked how often they sang with their family at home so that any increase could be identified. After six of the sessions, parents were asked to report on whether the sessions had impacted their feelings of closeness with their children, partner, and other parents. For this, the Pictorial Self-Other Scale was used (Aron et al., 1992). After the other sessions, parents answered a number of qualitative questions about how the session impacted them, their family, what they enjoyed, and what they would like done differently.

The quantitative survey data was analysed using descriptive statistics as a lack of consistency in the attendance of participants did not allow for inferential analysis. The qualitative data was analysed using a combination of content and thematic analysis for each individual question, and in some cases combined (for example, the question 'what was your favourite thing about today's session?' was combined with 'what have you enjoyed about the family choir?' in some of the analysis).

Interviews

In addition to the surveys, self-report data was obtained from one occupational therapist and one parent about their experiences of the family choir through a telephone interview. This took a maximum of 40 minutes and allowed for further in-depth exploration.

The interview data was analysed in relation to the survey data with the comments offered in interviews furthering some of the survey responses. This contributed to exploring the research questions.

Observations

To supplement the self-report data, the service evaluator attended eight sessions to carry out descriptive observation (Robson, 2002). Notes were made about the structure of the sessions and individual actions that helped to explore the research questions, mainly focusing on the social bond between family members and across families to explore how family singing extends the mother and baby sessions. The observation data is used to supplement the experiences of participants, rather than foreground the observation itself. Throughout the results, the observations provides illustrations of specific instances and similar experiences drawn upon in the surveys.

A note of thanks

Thank you to all those involved in this family choir research - to the parents, children, and staff at Made with Music and in the perinatal mental health team. Each week these participants completed surveys and shared their experiences of the sessions. It is from all of these surveys that such positive results have been obtained and we can really see the value of the family choir. Thank you for your dedication, honesty, and willingness. Finally, we are grateful to Leeds Inspired for funding the family choir and this service evaluation, and the University of Leeds for their support.

Results

The results of the surveys, interviews, and observations consistently suggest that the family choir has been beneficial to those involved as it has improved individual well being, and helped to build relationships between and within families. The key findings are that the family choir: had a positive impact on physical and mental states; allowed for positive connections with family; facilitated positive connections with other families. This results section will outline these findings before turning to a reflection of the musical aspects, the parent's expectations, and how challenges were overcome through the 15 sessions.

Individual Impact

Across both the spring and summer term, parents and staff consistently reported the family choir having a positive influence on their physical and mental state, as illustrated in Figure 2 & 3.

Figure 2

How did you feel physically before and after the session?

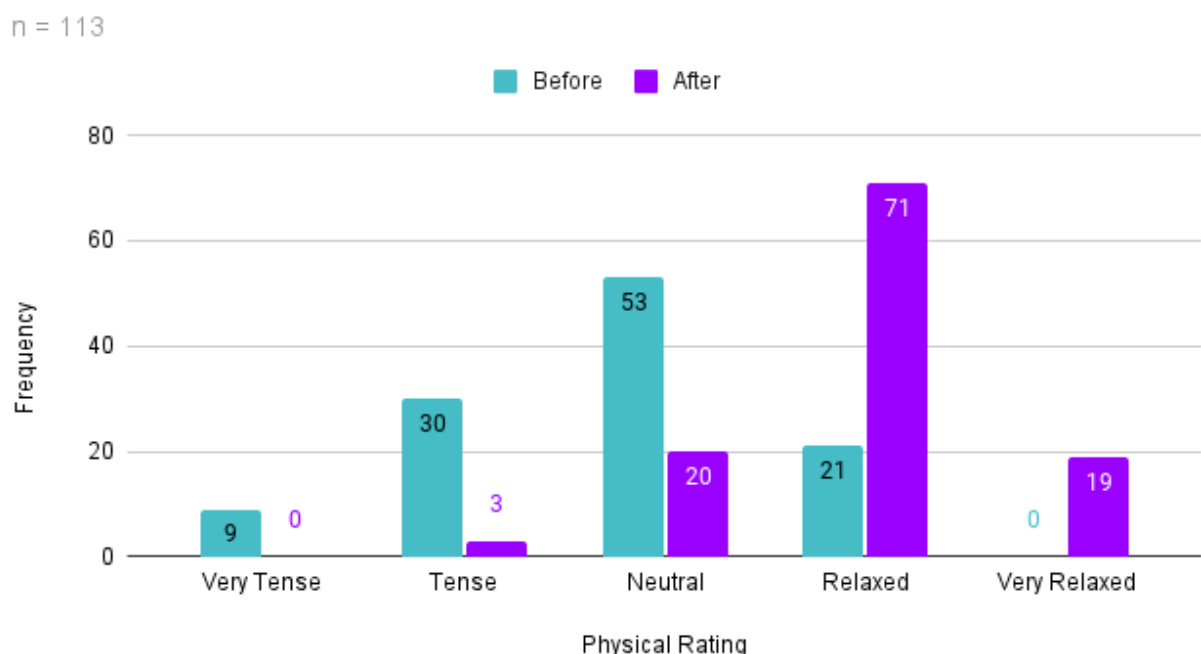
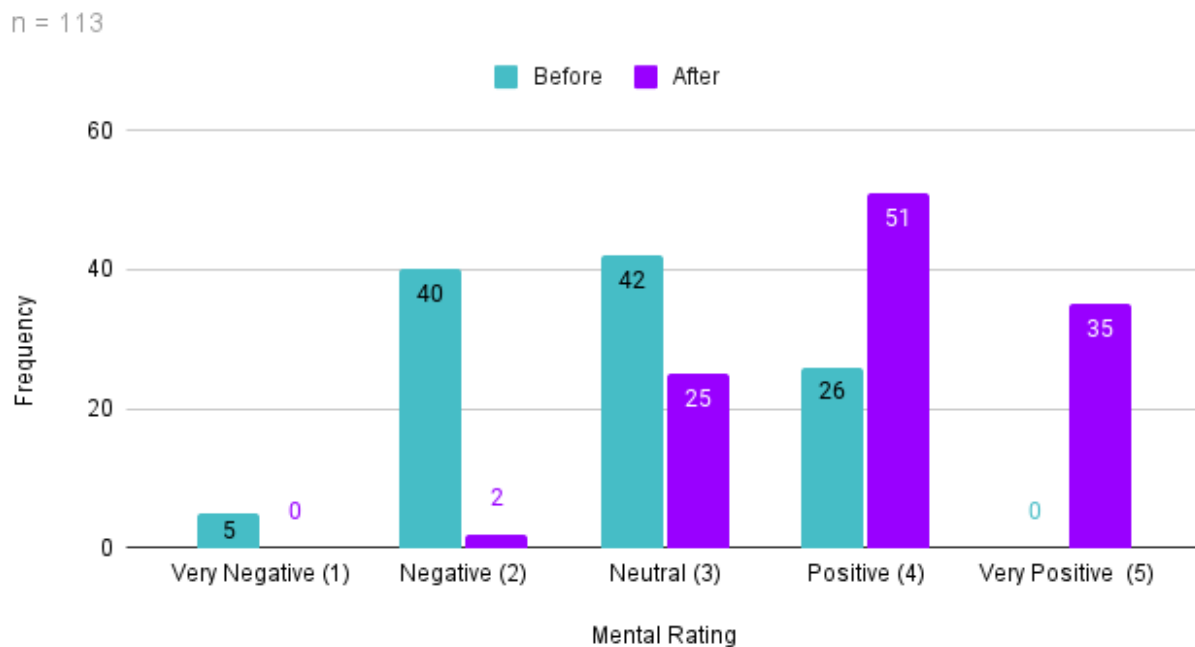


Figure 3

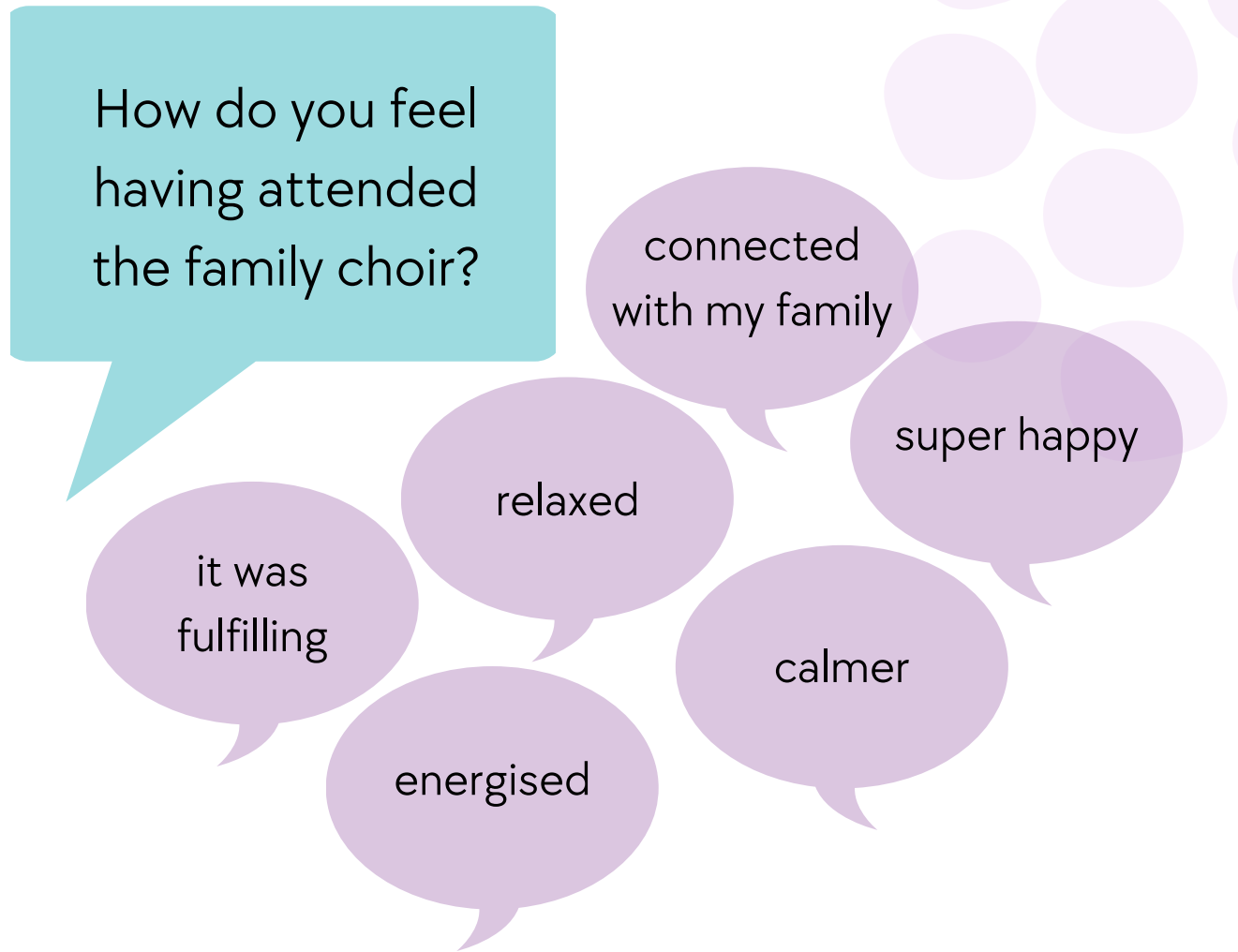
How did you feel mentally before and after the session?



Out of the 113 responses for this question across both terms, there were only a total of 25 instances when the family choir did not improve physical or mental state. Even fewer (3) of these instances were due to their state decreasing. This suggested a general positive influence of the family choir on physical and mental states.

In the summer term parents were asked how they felt before coming to the session, in comparison to how they felt having attended. Of the 53 who responded over the summer term, 38 initially felt positive before attending, 12 felt negative, and 3 felt neutral. However, by the end, all except one were glad that they had come, suggesting the family choir was a positive experience. Some of their positive feelings having attended are presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4



“I FEEL PRETTY GOOD WHEN WE SING TOGETHER”

PARENT

In order to explore the impact of the family choir beyond the session, parents in the summer term were asked how long the mental and physical effects lasted. It is encouraging to see that the majority of parents felt the benefits lasted longer than three hours after the session, and some felt that these continued throughout the next day and week, as illustrated in Figure 5 & 6.

Figure 5

How long did the physical benefits last?

n = 39

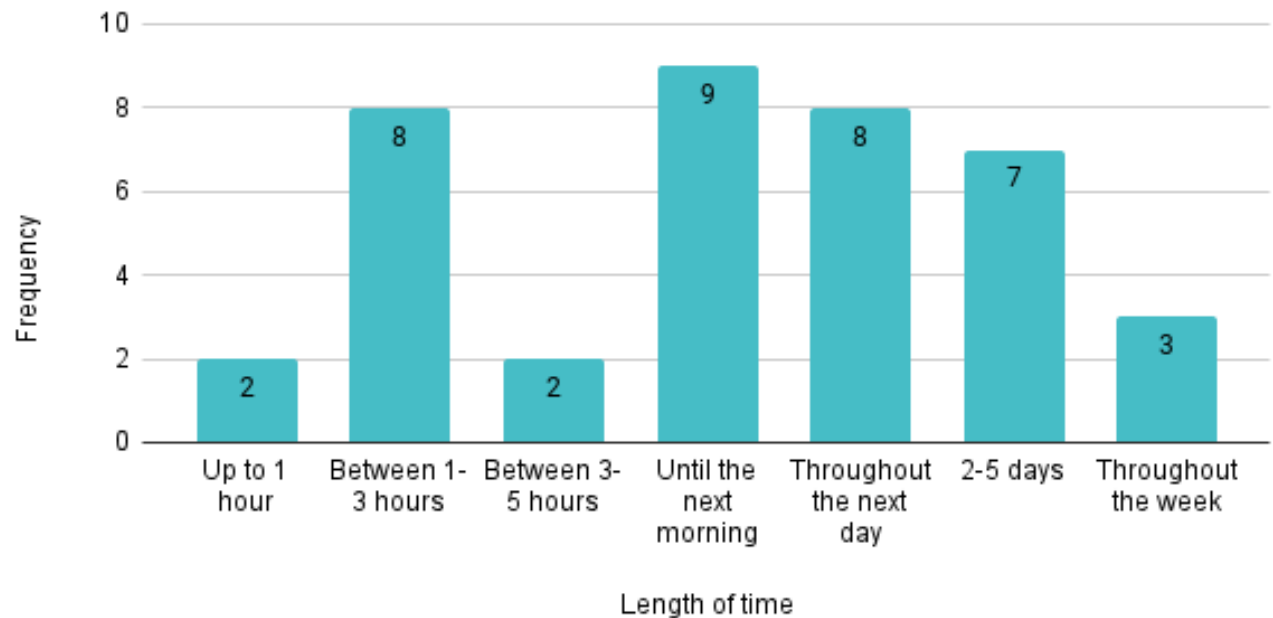
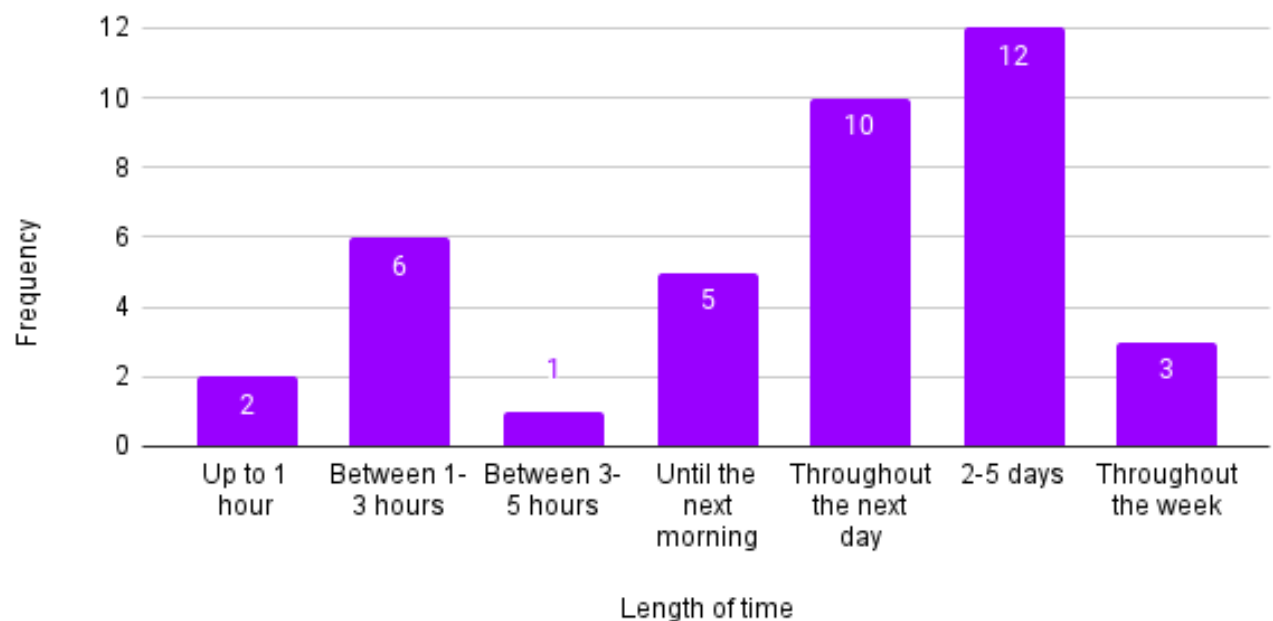


Figure 6

How long did the mental benefits last?

n = 39



Throughout the 15 weeks, parents were also invited to reflect on how the sessions were impacting them individually through qualitative questions. A thematic analysis of their responses concluded that the family choir impacted parents individually in 3 ways, as in Figure 7:

Figure 7

Thematic analysis of individual impact



These themes further indicate a positive impact on mental and physical state.

Most parents stated that they frequently sang with their children at home before the choir and were confident to do this, but by the end, 100% reported being confident and all felt the sessions had improved their confidence by giving them more songs (7), more ways to interact (such as signing) (3), and the opportunity to sing together (2).

These three things were also important for staff highlighting further how the sessions were not only beneficial for the service users and their families.

For example, session facilitators felt more confident and positive in their abilities to lead after a successful session and one session facilitator reflected on how the sessions improved their mood.

Additionally for staff the positive individual impact of the sessions often came from seeing the families and other staff get involved, even when they came to the session feeling tired and stressed.

"I WAS REALLY TIRED FROM THE WEATHER AND WORKING A LOT [...] BUT TALKING TO EVERYONE ABOUT WHAT THEY GET FROM THE SESSIONS, I REALISED THAT IT'S GREAT TO DO THEM".

SESSION FACILITATOR

Connection with Family

The family choir is unique as it is the only whole family intervention offered by the perinatal service. It is clear from the parent and staff responses that providing a space for the whole family to connect and meet one another, and for the partners to be involved in the service is really important.

"FUN FAMILY ACTIVITY"
OCCUPATIONAL
THERAPIST

When asked in the surveys how they felt attending had benefited their family, parents provided helpful insight into the influence of the family choir. The following four main themes highlight these family benefits, as is illustrated in some of the quotations from parents in response to the question "how do you feel the family choir is impacting your family?" (Figure 8):

Figure 8

Thematic analysis of family impact

1

Stress relief and relaxation: "bringing stress relief and light relief to a busy household"

2

Spending time together: "giving us opportunities to meet new people and experience new things together"

3

Connecting and bonding: "helped start to create a bond with my child"

4

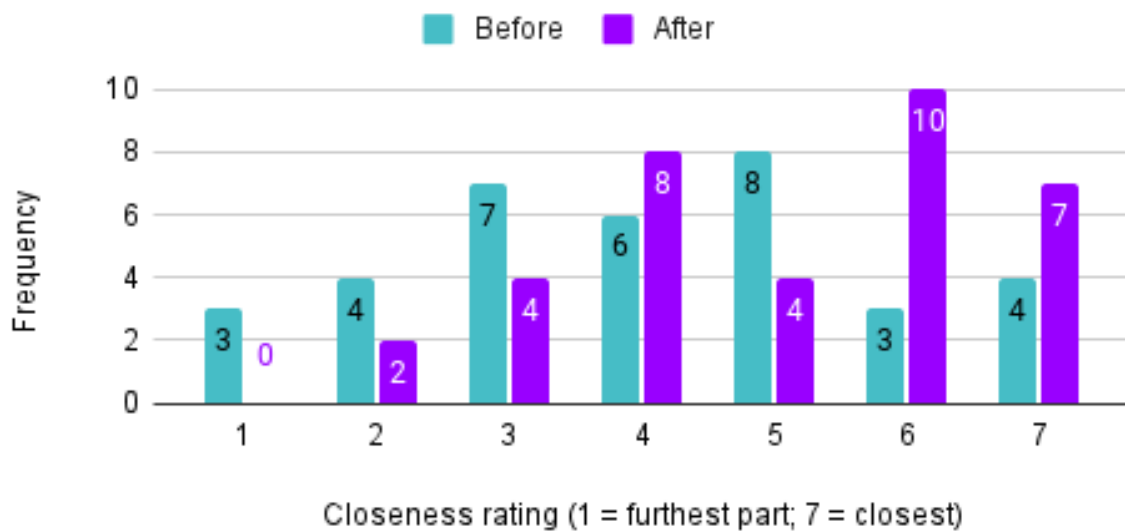
Extended musical influence: "there is a lot more music in our house and extended family houses"

In addition to considering how the sessions are impacting their family in a written response, parents were invited to reflect on how close they felt to others in the room before and after the session. 100% reported the family choir being positive for their family connection with no parent reporting feeling more distant from their children or partner at the end of the session than at the start across all weeks combined. Figures 9 & 10 provide summaries of this.

Figure 9

Closeness to child/children

n = 35



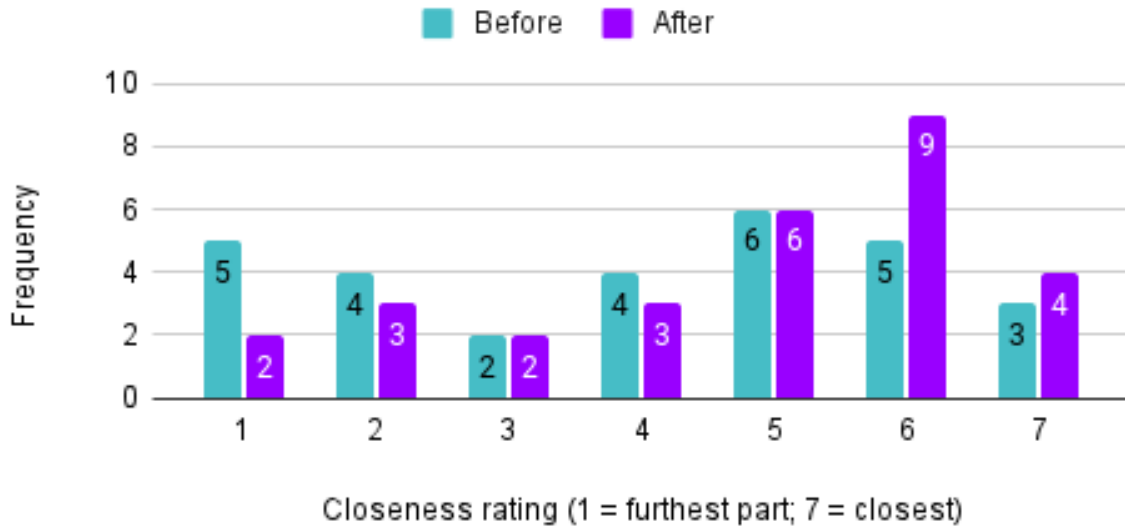
“THE SESSIONS ARE BRINGING US CLOSER AND WE ENJOY A SHARED INTEREST”

PARENT

Figure 10

Closeness to partner

n = 29



Many parents mentioned specific moments with their children being of utmost importance to them. They valued seeing their child singing, playing musical instruments, and being happy. These moments were also frequently recorded as moments which brought the family together in the observations of the sessions. Similarly, the staff commented on how much they enjoyed seeing these interactions.

One specific moment was one of the babies signing to the songs. This family appreciated attending the sessions to learn new signs and used them with their baby at home. The members of staff valued being able to witness this moment, with both session facilitators including it as a highlight at the end of the summer term.

Supporting the parents reflections on how the family choir had allowed them to connect with their family, members of staff perceived a similar positive influence. Referring to the bond developed between the families, the peer support worker involved commented on how she had observed "massive changes in confidence and how they interacted with their children" throughout the sessions.

**“I THINK MOST FAMILIES HAVE
IMPROVED THEIR MENTAL HEALTH
FROM OUR INTERACTIONS AND
GAINED MORE CONFIDENCE IN THEIR
FAMILY UNIT AND HOW TO BE
TOGETHER AND ENJOY THINGS
TOGETHER”**

SESSION FACILITATOR

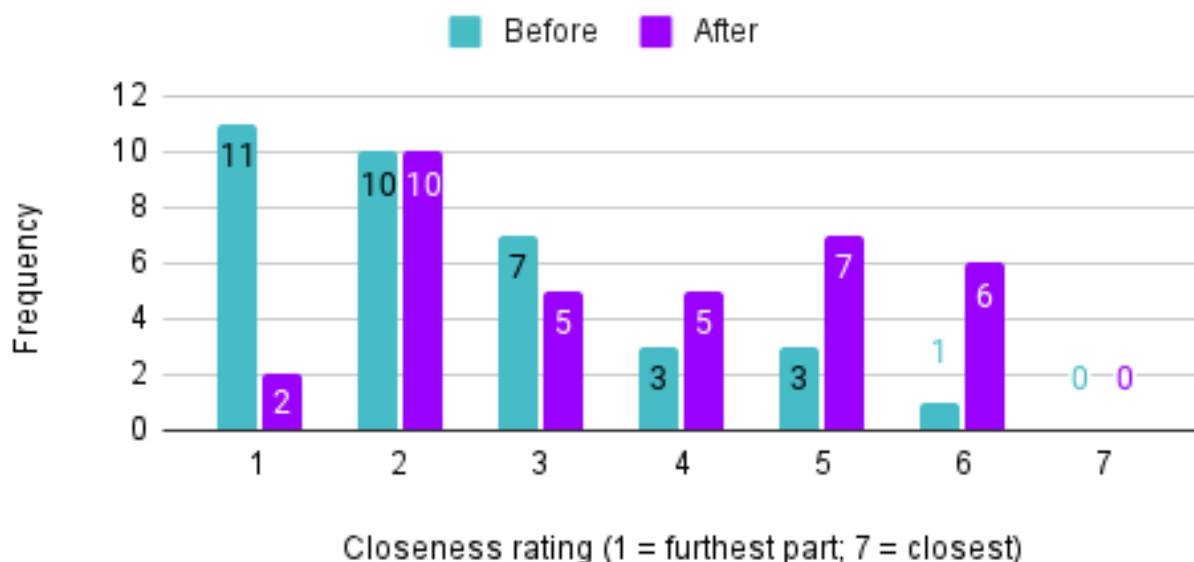
The fourth theme, extended musical influence, referred to how the family choir had acted as a springboard for families to be involved in music outside of the sessions. Members of staff frequently mentioned conversations with the families about the use of music at home, and during the summer term the session facilitators were encouraged when five families attended another event offered by MWM. Similarly, one mother mentioned that prior to the sessions their family did not sing together, but after being part of the family choir, singing was a regular occurrence at home.

Connection with Other Families

The family choir provided a space for parents and children to connect with others outside of their family. At the start of the summer term, two of the four parents who completed surveys stated they were nervous about socialising and meeting new people. However, throughout and at the end of the term, all but one parent stated that the opportunity to socialise with other parents was positive, and for many it was one of their favourite parts of the family choir. Similarly to Figure 9 & 10, Figure 11 illustrates how the family choir positively influenced parent's perceived closeness with others.

Figure 11
Closeness to other parents

n = 35



Being part of the family choir also allowed the children to form friendships with others their age. Two regularly attending families had children of similar ages who did not interact for the first couple of weeks. However, by the fourth session they began to play together and when they returned after the Easter break their parents said they had been speaking about each other. Both were excited to come to the session as they would see each other. This case demonstrates how the connections built went beyond the parents to the children themselves.

Another parent appreciated the opportunity to witness their children's friendships and get to know other families through their children, as expressed in the quote below.

**"I LOVED SEEING THE OTHER BABIES
AND OTHER FAMILIES THAT MY BABY
HAS DEVELOPED FRIENDSHIPS WITH"**
PARENT

In an interview at the end of the summer term, the occupational therapist described the family choir as a "community" which was evidenced in the way the families were making friends, chatting to each other, and meeting up outside of the sessions. This supports the reflections of parents and provides a professional perspective on how the family choir was effective in allowing connections with others to be formed.

Musical Aspects

The social benefits of the family choir may be partly related to the musical activity, as other research has suggested that group singing has a perceived social bonding effect (Camlin et al., 2020). Coming together to sing with others was mentioned 32 times across both terms as something the parents had enjoyed about the session(s). Figure 12 presents one mother's comment which illustrates how the singing provided a opportunity to have social connections with others.

Figure 12

What was your favourite thing about today's session?

Connecting with both my sons through music

Each family choir session included a range of songs chosen by the facilitators and the parents that were geared towards the babies, older siblings, and adults. The different songs were often mentioned as highlights of the session by parents, although it was important to make sure these did not get repetitive. At the start of both terms, the staff were asked what they were looking forward to. Unsurprisingly, the session facilitators often mentioned the musical aspects including learning new songs, and singing in harmony when answering this question. This musical focus is unique to the family choir which focuses more on learning to sing together than the mother and baby groups which prioritise promoting interactions between each other.

All parents had a positive reaction to the musical aspects of the family choir throughout the summer term, with only one stating they were uncertain about not knowing some of the songs.

The parents reported appreciating four main things (Figure 13):

Figure 13

Thematic analysis of musical aspects



As well as learning new songs, the family choir gave opportunities for parents to develop their singing and become more confident singing together. This extended beyond the sessions, with one mother speaking about how the family choir had given them and their partner the confidence to sing the songs at home and out and about to soothe their child when they were distressed.

By session 4 & 5, the session facilitators both noted how it was great that so many people were joining in with the harmonies, as was one of their earlier hopes for the project. This continued to increase throughout the summer term as the parents became more confident singing around each other. At the end of the sessions, one dad asked about singing lessons because they made him realise how much he enjoyed singing. This is one example of how the family choir can positively benefit all involved in multiple ways.

Many of the parents were grateful for the ways in which the session facilitators had run the choir to cater to the needs of all involved. In an interview, one mother mentioned how they felt the sessions were well organised and welcoming which made them feel happy about attending. Each session began with the same song in which everyone sang 'hello' to the babies and children present. In the fourth session, one older sibling became excited as they realised this would happen and therefore everyone would sing to them. The regular routine made this child feel settled and ready for the session.

"A MASSIVE THANK YOU TO KATHRYN AND HANNAH"

PARENT

The facilitators also frequently adapted their plans to include each person present depending on how they were feeling on a given day. In one session alone, there were four noticeable instances of how they used props, responded to requests, and used instruments to engage the older siblings. This allowed for each member of the families to interact and benefit from the musical aspects at their own level.

"THANK YOU FOR ALL THE SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE BEEN GIVEN BY THE STAFF"

PARENT

Did the sessions meet your expectations?

The sessions were very successful in meeting the parents' expectations. When asked if there was anything positive or negative which was unexpected, a number of parents responded. Multiple parents mentioned learning songs for a range of ages and in other languages, and a smaller number mentioned that they were surprised by how much singing helped to improve their mood.

100% of parents said that the sessions met their expectations - and in some cases they were exceeded!

One parent commented on how singing in the family choir had brought out her older son's (age 4) love for music. In addition, she felt that regularly attending the family choir had helped to improve his language, communication, and pronunciation. This was entirely unexpected and a very positive outcome of being involved.

Unfortunately, one parent found the family involvement challenging as they felt their baby had occasionally missed out on some activities due to the over-excitement of the older children. This was unexpected when attending a group at the perinatal service, and leads to the important mention of a challenge that was overcome throughout the 15 weeks.

Main Challenge

Whilst singing as a family was consistently a positive thing, one of the main challenges faced was including the older children. Initially, the staff felt they would just fit in but they quickly realised this was not always the case. In some instances, over-excitement meant that parents did not feel comfortable leaving their baby on the floor, and shared this. The staff were also aware of this and consistently reflected on it, stating that the facilitation for this age group could be improved.

To try and accommodate them, the staff used toys, interactive songs, and props. This included bubbles, instruments (such as a drum and cajon), and material to use in songs. This was appreciated by the parents, both of the older children and the babies.

"GREAT IDEA TO HAVE SOMETHING PHYSICAL FOR THE OLDER CHILDREN TO REFOCUS AND HAVING TOYS TO CALM"

PARENT

In an interview at the end of the 15 weeks, the occupational therapist reflected on how accommodating everyone safely and comfortably was a journey. However, by the end she and the session facilitators felt they had developed useful strategies to include the older children and allow everyone to benefit from the sessions. This is supported with the overwhelmingly positive response from parents at the end of the summer term family choir.

Ultimately, the family choir was a beneficial activity as it had a positive influence on individual mental and physical state, improved family connections, and facilitated the building of connections with others. We are hopeful that this can continue to help support more families.

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