

# Parental participation in a visual arts programme on a neonatal unit

The creative arts can have a significant positive effect on health. A pilot study of a visual arts programme run by two professional artists for parents of babies on a neonatal unit is described. The methods the artists employed and evaluation of the project by artists, staff and parents are discussed.

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Parents of babies admitted to a neonatal unit may suffer from stress. Alteration in the parental role<sup>1</sup>, the behaviour and appearance of the baby<sup>1,2</sup>, sights and sounds in the unit<sup>1</sup>, and concern about the baby's pain<sup>3</sup> may all contribute to this stress. Post-traumatic stress disorder may develop after the baby is discharged, and this may be associated with increased behavioural problems in the infant<sup>4</sup>.

The creative arts can have a significant positive effect on health<sup>5,6</sup>. Engaging in a creative process can be a relaxing diversion. On a deeper level, engagement also has the potential for allowing the expression of fears and anxieties, difficult to express verbally, and might provide emotional support and alleviate stress.

In this pilot study, parents of babies on the neonatal unit were offered the chance to participate in a visual art programme run by two professional artists.

## The study

The aims were twofold – to increase parental well-being and to study the impact of running a creative arts intervention on the functioning of a neonatal unit.

The project took place on the neonatal unit of the Southern General Hospital, Glasgow between October 08 and March 09. Advice was sought from the Local Ethics Committee regarding the requirement for informed written consent for participation. It was adjudged that the project represented a service evaluation and informed written consent was not required. Written consent for the use of images of parents and their baby, which might be published or used in exhibitions or meetings, was obtained.

Enhanced disclosure was obtained for the two professional artists (S.A. and K.S.)

who were involved in the project. The artists visited the unit singly and together, one day a week, spending three days weekly in all. They worked sensitively and flexibly with parents and were responsive to the working of the neonatal unit. M.W. had overall responsibility for the project and was the point of contact for any queries or clinical concerns.

Parents were informed of the visual arts programme by leaflet on their baby's admission. When their baby was stable, they were invited by midwives and the artists to participate.

Forty-one family members participated: 25 mothers, 13 fathers and three siblings. The artists approached 24 other parents who declined to take part. The reasons for non-participation were not recorded by the artists as they thought the process of building up a relationship would take time, and parents might change their mind and become involved at a later date, as some did.

A wide range of art materials, art books (for examples and inspiration), a digital SLR camera with zoom lens, and an all-in-one photo printer and scanner were bought. The artists applied a number of different approaches including: practical sessions using art materials with parents at the cotside; offering parents the use of a digital SLR camera with zoom lens; designing prompt cards outlining different techniques, materials; and exercises that parents could try, when the artists were not present.

## Evaluation

After participation in the project, parents were asked to complete a questionnaire (FIGURE 1). At the end of the project, a cross section of medical and nursing staff completed a questionnaire (FIGURE 2).

## Keywords

creative; art project; parents; neonatal unit; evaluation

## Key points

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1. A visual arts project for parents on a neonatal unit was successfully conducted by two professional artists.
2. Parents who participated enjoyed the experience, claimed it relieved their stress and wanted it to continue.
3. The project did not interfere with the work of the unit.
4. The majority of staff thought it was worthwhile and wanted it to continue.

We would be very grateful if you would spare a few moments to fill in this form. This will help us to know whether the art project, which you have participated in, is worthwhile or whether it should be changed in any way.

Please be honest in your answers. It is helpful to know what didn't work as well as anything you found valuable.

**You do not have to give your name.**

- What did you think when first informed about the art project?
- Were you nervous of participating and if so why?
- How do you feel about taking part in the project now?
- Did you enjoy participating?
- Do you feel it was worthwhile?
- Are you pleased with the work you have created?
- Do you feel any better in yourself since taking part?
- Do you think that taking part in this project helped ease the stress of having a baby on the baby unit?
- Has this made you feel any different towards your baby?
- Do you think it is a good idea to have an art project on the baby unit?
- Would you like to see the art project continue?

Please write any other comments you would like to make about the project or ways of improving it. Thank you.

**FIGURE 1** Parental questionnaire: evaluation of art project.

The artists evaluated the project as successful if the following four criteria, based on their previous experience working as arts facilitators in healthcare projects, were met:

- Parents were engaged in a creative process developed over more than two sessions.
- Parents expressed enjoyment and interest in the activity.
- Parents used this experience to think about their situation and the environment from a different perspective.

- The project did not interfere with the functioning of the unit.

### Results

Although the artists were experienced in working in health care, the neonatal unit provided new challenges. Here they were not engaging with the patient, as was their usual practice, but with the parents of the patient, who were often in a state of heightened anxiety. The artists took time to become accustomed to the neonatal unit environment and to gain confidence in

Please take a few moments to fill in this questionnaire to help us evaluate the art project. Please be honest. It is important to find out what didn't work as well as what was perceived to be valuable.

- What did you think about the art project when you first heard about it?
- Did you think that parents would be interested in participating?
- Did you have any doubts about the project fitting in with the work of the unit?
- Have you found the art project to interfere with the running of the neonatal unit? If so please elaborate.
- Did you find any difficulties with the art programme? Please elaborate.
- Have you found the art programme to increase your workload?
- Do you think this is a worthwhile service to offer parents, bearing in mind it was not NHS funded?  
If your answer was no, please elaborate.  
If yes, why do you think it was worthwhile?
- In your opinion has the arts programme improved the ambience/working ethos of the neonatal unit? Please elaborate.
- Would you like to see this programme continue or not?
- Do you think the project has had a positive impact on the health and well-being of parents, siblings or other family members?
- If so **how** do you think the project has benefited parents, siblings or other family members?

**Please feel free to make any further comments below.**

It would be helpful to know whether you are a midwife, neonatal nurse or medical staff and what your grade is so we know we have asked a wide spectrum of staff. There is no need to give your name. Thank you.

**FIGURE 2** Staff questionnaire; evaluation of art project.

approaching parents, who were totally focused on their baby. In the main, the parents' involvement in art was intermittent or postponed until their baby was progressing.

A 'drop-in session' was organised at the request of one of the mothers. An empty clinical area was used. Tea, coffee and biscuits were provided and art books and materials laid out. A non-clinical atmosphere was achieved. This was successful and led to ongoing involvement for several mothers.

Parents tried a variety of media including drawing, painting and photography (FIGURES 3 and 4). Two parents in the same room tried collage to make an abstracted image of their baby. They shared ideas and influenced each other's image making, highlighting the importance of the social dimension of the project, which brought people from different backgrounds together in a communal activity.

Conversation during the creative activity was sometimes revealing, as in one mother with previous postnatal depression who intimated to the artists that she was having difficulty bonding with her baby. To connect her to her baby when she could not see him, photos of her baby were taken and paper provided so that she and her partner might continue to draw from the photos at home.

As the project evolved, the camera was used more extensively, to document a baby's progress but also as a creative tool (FIGURE 5) All parents receive photos of their baby taken by nursing staff on admission. However, parents commented that they preferred to wait until their baby was unattached to equipment, before taking their own photographs, thus missing the earliest days of their premature baby's life. In using the SLR camera with zoom lens, higher resolution images were possible, focusing on the baby and removing high tech equipment from the image field. Parents were also helped to improve their pictorial composition. The quality of the photographs obtained meant the image would not portray the baby negatively, unlike a first drawing had the potential to do. Some parents made a photographic diary of their baby's progress.

The original thought was that the focus of art work would be the baby, however personal space around the cot was a consistent issue for parents. This is the only personal space a parent has while on the unit and where a parent has a clearly defined role, tending and watching their baby. It is also the primary area where medical treatment is given to the baby and is therefore a very complex space (FIGURE 6).

One mother requested to work alone and took strong photographic images of the cot and surrounding area. In working on her own, she echoed the words of another parent who believed art making was a "private activity". Such a space for



FIGURE 3 Drawing by mother.



FIGURE 4 A father draws his wife and baby.



FIGURE 5 Mother's photo of baby's hand.

reflection had a positive effect on the personal nature of the images made and suggested the importance of personal space in the unit.

*"Thinking about images that weren't always of the girls but were such potent reminders of SCBU – the equipment, the environment. These other images are very evocative."* Parent

Another mother created a series of photographs based on what she thought her baby could see, with the camera set to focus up to 30 cm away from the perspective of the baby's head, resulting in a series of abstract and out-of-focus images of ceiling and window.

## Staff questionnaires

Ten questionnaires were returned from a range of staff: midwives, neonatal nurses, nursery nurse and junior doctor. There were initial uncertainties about the project. Sixty per cent thought parents would be interested in the project, but only half of the staff were positive about the project. Four were unsure how it would work in a neonatal unit. The majority (80%) had doubts about whether it would interfere with the work of the unit, but at completion of the project, 90% said it did not interfere. The majority (80%) found no difficulties with the art programme. One commented on "art materials lying in cots", and another indicated there could be "a lot of people in a room" when the unit was busy. This might have been alleviated by utilising a separate room when the artists visited.

No member of staff thought that the art programme had increased their workload.

*"The artists were very friendly and approachable and did their best not to interfere with our day-to-day work. They were a pleasure to work alongside."*

The majority (80%) thought it a worthwhile service, believed it had a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of parents, and thought it should continue. Six (60%) thought the arts programme had improved the ambience of the unit, which was described as "more relaxed" and "de-medicalised."

Staff commented on how parents enjoyed the project and received attention. It gave them a different focus, and helped to occupy their time "...it was nice to have the attention focused on the parents for a change, albeit connected to the baby." Some were surprised at the parents who became involved. "It wasn't the parents I expected to be involved." It gave parents an outlet for expressing anxieties and "made staff more aware of how parents" felt "during a very difficult time."

Staff suggested the importance of the artists having "a specific room for their own use", which "parents could use if for any reason unable to be by baby's bedside."

Some staff indicated they would like to be involved in the future.

## Parent questionnaires

Not all participants received questionnaires. Of 14 given to parents, 10 (71%) completed questionnaires were returned. All were completed by mothers.

Although the majority (70%) were nervous about participating, all enjoyed the experience, found it worthwhile and claimed it helped alleviate their stress. Eight mothers said it helped them feel better in themselves and all wanted the project to continue. Seven of the mothers who had completed work were pleased with the results. They particularly enjoyed photography. The majority did not find the project made them feel differently towards their baby, but two did and said: *“It has helped me watch his progress closely... It helped me appreciate what he has come through.”* It *“brought us closer and more happy”*.

Another said that although it did not alter how she felt towards her baby, it *“helped me feel less as if I was ‘living in a movie’ and it made the SCBU experience seem more real”*.

### A worthwhile project

Three mothers described how valuable the project was as a distraction.

*“Having something to concentrate on helped focus your mind”*.

*“Sometimes in SCBU, as a parent, you feel lonely and isolated. This, coupled with the stress of having twins born eight weeks early, meant the distraction of the art project was very welcome”*.

Three indicated how the project focused them on their baby.

*“It got me to look at C very closely”*.

Two stressed the importance of having a record of their baby's time on the unit.

*“Creating a record of this difficult time has helped make it seem more bearable.”*

*“I felt... happy to see the pictures... that show progress in the twins.”*

Two found it an enjoyable use of time.

*“I felt it was worthwhile because I spent a long time in SCBU and most days you would sit for hours not having much to do.”*

*“It is a good way of easing parents’ tension and getting them to enjoy some of the time they spend... with their kids..”*

Two were helped to feel less isolated.

*“The project made me feel... belong to something worthwhile.”*

### Feeling better since taking part

Two commented it was enjoyable. *“It cheered me up.”*

Two found it increased self esteem or confidence. *“I feel I achieved something that I thought I wouldn’t.”* It *“has built up my confidence in a big way.”*

Two described increased focus or



FIGURE 6 Personal space.

closeness to baby. *“It has brought me closer toward my kids.”* It *“kept me busy and more focused on the baby.”*

One commented how: *“Just doing something helps relieve the stress of being a new parent.”*

### Stress relieving

Four described the value of the project as a distraction. *“Filling the time and thinking about the images I was creating, helped me deal with the SCBU experience.”*

*“It helped to focus your mind and stopped your thoughts wondering to worries about your baby; thoughts which can become very upsetting and disabling, and are often unfounded.”*

*“It’s a good diversion... especially for parents who are there for longer periods.”*

Three indicated it was enjoyable. *“It made it more fun. I got to do something with my son.”*

One described how it helped her to realise progress in her baby.

### Other comments

Parents made other positive comments in the free text on the questionnaire.

*“The art project really helped me.”*

*“They do a great job at bringing you closer to your baby by getting you to forget about the surroundings you’re in and concentrate on your baby and detail of your baby.”*

*“I would like other mums to experience the art project as it helps with the time you are going through.”*

*“I would like to say thank you as I have had fun and have been brought closer to the twins.”*

*“It would be a great shame if the art project didn’t continue. It is a great opportunity for mums and dads to express their feelings, through art, about their baby. Continue the good work.”*

*“Projects like these should continue and... benefit all who spend long periods at hospitals. This type of reassurance can improve one’s self esteem.”*

Considering the criteria for success

established by the artists, we felt that most parents were not engaged in a sustained creative process. Despite this, parents did express interest and enjoyment in the activity. Their comments in the questionnaire also suggest that criterion three was met to some degree. In addition the project did not negatively impact on the running of the neonatal unit.

### Discussion

This article describes a pilot project of a visual arts programme run by professional artists for parents on a neonatal unit. Although staff were initially hesitant about the project, none found it increased their workload and the majority thought the project was worthwhile and should continue.

Parents also had initial reservations but all enjoyed the experience, claimed it relieved their stress and wanted it to continue. The project was a distraction and focused their minds on a different activity, albeit linked to their baby. It was enjoyable and in some parents alleviated their sense of isolation, made their experience more real and increased self confidence. Others found the detailed focus on their baby made them feel closer to their child.

This was a short project and the author's believe that more could have been achieved over time, especially if there had been the provision of a non-clinical room, even on a temporary basis, for each visit of the artists. Space is always at a premium in a neonatal unit and the initial assumption was that parents would not want to leave their baby's cot side. There was therefore no dedicated 'art space' for the duration of the project. Over the course of the project, the need for a dedicated space was highlighted as a priority by parents, staff and artists. This would allow a place for the artists to be based, where parents could drop in and work in addition to at the cot side. It would remove parents from the stress of the clinical areas and allow them to explore and express their feelings in privacy. It also has the potential to be a social space. A regular drop-in session would have encouraged more parents to get involved, and allowed staff the opportunity to participate.

Working fathers tend to visit the neonatal unit in the evening. Therefore to increase the chance of more fathers participating in a future project, the artists would need to visit the unit in the evening as well as during the day.

Non-participation questionnaires should be used in a future project and could be given out on discharge.

All parents submitting questionnaire responses in the present study claimed it had relieved their stress. Although parental stress can fluctuate widely on the neonatal unit, reflecting the day-to-day variations in the baby's progress, measuring parent's stress before and after completion in any future art project might be worthwhile, eg utilising the Parental Stress Index<sup>7</sup>. However parents would need to be involved in a more continuous creative process for analysis of such an index to be meaningful.

A neonatal unit is a complex environment for artists to adapt to and work in and this should be reflected in the time allocated to any future project. It has been suggested that volunteers, eg recently retired clinical staff, who are familiar with this environment might run a similar project. However the authors believe that trained artists are better equipped to respond to the creative needs and abilities of each individual.

A second phase of this project has been

funded by the Scottish Arts Council (now Creative Scotland) and will draw on interviews which the artists had with parents and staff to develop a practical workshop to explore and facilitate understanding between the groups and to create a publication documenting the different perspective and experiences of parents. This will provide a lasting legacy of the art project in the neonatal unit. In addition the charity, Art in Hospital, would like to continue the visual art programme in the neonatal unit. This would require the generation of £35,000 per year to fund two professional artists, working part time.

In conclusion, this pilot study has shown it is possible to run a creative art project on a busy neonatal unit and this activity appears to have benefits for parents.

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