

Witnessing the Possible

How I came to describe the unusual and wonderful experience of attending live performance with your baby

Dr Charlotte Allan

It's exciting to be able to say, I've got my PhD. A long and detailed research project has been followed to its 100,000-word completion and I get to hold a cardboard tube for the camera and call myself a Doctor of Philosophy. The full thesis is available [to read here](#), and begins with gratitude to those who made it possible: my supervisors, family, friends, and most of all the research participants who let me listen and watch.

I'm enthusiastic in replying to people's questions about the process (tough but enjoyable, magic ingredient is good supervision) and the subject (the audience experience of Theatre for Early Years, babies are endlessly fascinating). What I've noticed is missing though is somewhere I can direct people who want to know more, but are understandably not keen to read the whole thesis. I do plan to publish articles from aspects of it, and have a chapter in a book coming out, but I also wanted to offer something quick, immediate, and accessible. So here it is!

Conclusion

Attending live performance designed for a very young audience can be supportive of the parent/carer-child relationship, sometimes having a deep and lasting impact. Factors that influence this are the attention and care paid by artists and parents, the communal nature of the experience, and its unusualness. Making space for babies and toddlers to access arts and culture takes effort, but the impact in terms of enhanced empathy has benefits for the young families attending and by extension, wider society.

Why?

The central question in my research has been one I've been asking for as long as I have been making and attending theatre for the youngest audiences. What is it like for babies to experience live performance? Research into early development, including neuroscience, has provided fascinating insights into what the world is like from the perspective of children from birth (and sometimes earlier). That we are born connected to one another is now well established, as is that there is no age before which we act with intention. Meeting babies as if they are people is not fanciful or indulgent, but an

intuitively appropriate response. And people like art. Trying to understand the experience of another person of any age isn't obvious or simple, nor is it easy to communicate our own inner world. Artists of all disciplines are concerned with this act of transmission and reception, a relational experience where we move one-another. At live performance for the very young there is also another relationship at play, that between the young audience member and the trusted adult with whom they are attending. I set out to describe the emotional, physical and thoughtful detail of these encounters.

[Small Size](#) collected research into live performance for the early years
Communicative Musicality by Stephen Malloch and Colwyn Trevarthen
Exploring Relational Pedagogy by Theodor Papatheodorou

How?

My research is qualitative - I'm interested in things that count that can't be counted. It is also interpretative, which means I need to be clear about where I am coming from as my voice and thoughts are present throughout. Although I have a background in creating theatre for under 5s I wanted this project to keep its focus on the audience, and I did not create any work as part of it. I was also careful not to critique the various works described. As I was investigating a physical phenomenon, often with non-verbal people, I also found the idea of embodied research very useful. Certainly tricky when so much research input and output is reliant on words, but thinking about the physical experience of my participants, as well as my own, was something which was important at various stages. My analysis process drew together words, images, video, and my own embodied responses to create portraits of the families I met and observed and themes created from all the interviews and observations.

Thematic Analysis by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke
Embodiment in Qualitative Research by Laura L. Ellingson

Who?

There were two parts to my data gathering:

- **Phase one** was fifty interviews with adults who answered 'yes' to the question 'have you ever been to a live performance with a baby or toddler?'
- **Phase two** was observing the audience at a single performance of *Float*, by Kerry Cleland, then interviewing the adults a couple of weeks later.

Phase one gave me a good range of descriptions of experience from adults' perspectives with a mix of ages, relationships, types of performances attended, time elapsed since the story described, and quality of experience from awesome to terrible. Phase two provided different kinds of data, with detail on the in-the-moment embodied

experiences of nine curious babies and their parents. I was also able to share screenshots of the video with parents at our later interviews so they could make their own observations.

[Float](#) by Kerry Cleland, produced by Starcatchers

What?

I described my **findings** through Case Portraits - profiles of the families who attended *Float*, including visual mapping of their movements in the space, and themes. Three main themes - Attention, Sharing, and (Un)known – were each then broken into secondary and tertiary themes. The aim here was to describe the underlying principles of the encounters in the data, for example a focus on what influences feelings of safety rather than listing how many people felt welcomed and how many intimidated.

I then framed my **discussion** chapter around important tensions, which I titled ‘dances’ to keep a reference to the moving and responsive nature of both live performances and being with very young children. These were:

- **The Dance of the Rules**, which described the sometimes complicated social environment created by inviting children under three to become an audience.
- **The Dance of Space and Time**, which focused on the content of the artistic offer in terms of how it is inhabited and the meanings created.
- **The Dance of Self and Other**, which explored the dynamic relationships within the live performance space, particularly that between the child and their adult companion.

So what, who cares?

This was a favourite catchphrase of one of my supervisors, and a useful reminder to keep things useful. It was necessary to spend time evidencing that live performance for the very young can be meaningful, moving, and have lasting impact on the parent-child relationship as this impact can be subtle, internal, and not obvious in the moment. Even more helpful is going on to describe the factors which create the best conditions.

Listening to people talk about experiences which were unpleasant, annoying, boring or upsetting was also super valuable in describing what works, or at least what helps.

These are the mechanisms for impact that I developed from my research:

Creative Attunement¹. This is the skill of performing artists who work with very young audiences in responding to their spectators in embodied, creative and communicative ways. Often incorporating an art-form specific skill, for example a musical instrument, this interactive performance skill of communicating with pre and non-verbal children was cited as significant in the most impactful experiences.

Concerted Inclusion². A phrase to describe how parents and carers of young children actively bring their children into shared cultural and artistic experiences. These can be personal to individuals such as love of a genre of music, incorporate family rituals, or wider culture such as language or folk tales. The bringing in, of new family members to our shared community, was deliberate, meaningful and bonding for families.

Witnessing the Possible³. As well as being alongside them, parent/carers experienced live performances through the responses of their children. This enhanced empathy in the adult both as a feeling - the sharing of positive experience, and as a thoughtful process - imagining the world through the eyes of their tiny companion. Successful audience experiences were often met with surprise and delight, developing an increased understanding and respect for a baby who was now perceived as holding capacities in aesthetic reception not otherwise considered. Parents were proud of their babies and each other. Grateful to the artists and the opportunity created. Necessary for this optimal experience was a safe space (emotionally, socially, and physically), good communication, and high-quality art.

The findings of this PhD support decisions to invest in arts experiences for young families, encourages artists to follow their impulses, and reminds us all that our youngest citizens have a right to a place in our cultural landscape. Crucially, this thesis is a story of connection. How irreducible, shared, embodied experiences can bring us closer to those we love most, and introduce the possibility of meaningful connection with unknown others (at least for the duration of a performance).

¹ Attunement was coined by psychologist Daniel Stern to describe the connected way parents and babies communicate and move one-another.

² This is a riff off 'concerted cultivation', a sociology term which describes a middle-class approach to parenting that is characterised by intentional activity to develop the child's skills.

³ No hidden reference here, made this one up myself.