



Case Study

Helena and Flynn's Tuneful Chatter Story

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Tuneful Chatter

Tuneful Chatter is a joyful, vibrant programme of movement, music and play for Doncaster 0-5-year-olds and their parents/carers. It is designed to develop the social, emotional and communication skills that provide the foundation for children to learn, grow and thrive in and beyond school.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, very young children were the hardest hit, missing out on the crucial opportunities to socialise, learn and grow up in our communities, not being able to experience opportunities that would typically form the basis of a child's development. In February 2022, darts undertook a survey with Doncaster Early Years practitioners to determine the impact of Covid-19 and found that, for a cohort of babies and under-fives born in and living through the pandemic, there have been worrying repercussions personal, social and emotional development (PSED). With high levels of deprivation across Doncaster, the local impact is severe.

More information on Tuneful Chatter and programme delivery can be found on our [website](#).

Flynn and Helena's story

Flynn first came to Tuneful Chatter aged three with his mum, Helena, in January 2023. Helena told us that when Flynn was around two years old, she noticed a change in his communication ability. He became much shyer and found interaction with others his own age really challenging. It was at this point that Helena noticed difficulties around Flynn's communication and began to do all she could to support Flynn to overcome these challenges.

"He has difficulties with communication and some sensory need, so since then he has been referred for a GDA (General Development Assessment)... so we are exploring whether Flynn is perhaps Autistic or not."

Coming out of his shell

Initially, when they first came to Tuneful Chatter, Flynn found sessions daunting, and socialising with other children was difficult, but as the weeks went on Tuneful Chatter became something he looked forward to and he built up the courage to tackle social situations.

"It's about exposing him to social situations that he finds hard, because that's real life. And this is not daunting... it's overcoming that barrier for Flynn. For his personal development, it's been brilliant for that."

Helena said that the sessions provided enough gentle challenge for him to build resilience and grow in confidence, but without any pressure. The artists delivering sessions made it feel safe for him to take some time out, put his ear defenders on when he became overwhelmed, and then join in at his

own pace. Helena told us that for Flynn, this element of gentle challenge has been essential in helping him to catch up and become ready for school in the future.

Making connections

darts' experienced artists design and deliver activity that children can take part in both independently or with their grown-ups, as well as with other children. This means that those who struggle with interaction are able to build up connections gradually, through play and exploration in an environment that suits them. With Flynn finding socialising and communicating with his peers more difficult than other three-year-olds would, Helena told us that this structure was important in developing Flynn's willingness and ability to interact with others.

"He thrives on that, and he's made really positive connections with Charlie and with Beth [artists] and that's not typical for Flynn."

Learning and language

The programme is designed and delivered collaboratively by darts' professional dance artists, theatre practitioners and musicians. For Flynn, one of the most enjoyable and beneficial aspects of the sessions is the incorporation of music, rhyme and song – ***"he loves it."***

"It is fantastic for spontaneous language... Charlie [artist] is very good at modelling that."

Helena told us how she noticed that Flynn had a very small word bank and became worried when this regressed to the point where her son was no longer talking. Although his language began to develop again, it happened a lot later than it usually would, and Flynn had become very shy. Yet, she told us that Tuneful Chatter is one of the only groups that Flynn feels comfortable speaking in. For Flynn, coming to groups such as Tuneful Chatter, alongside the Helena's dedication to supporting Flynn to develop, has enabled him to improve his language and vocabulary again.

"Because there is no sort of pressure on the children, and it's being modelled really clearly and really well, I think that's helped him develop that [language and communication]."

Tailor-made delivery

The Tuneful Chatter sessions often use creative play to stimulate turn-taking, acting with kindness, communication and imagination. Helena told us that as Flynn's development is at a different stage to other children of his own age, this is something that he often tends to struggle with, creating a marked difference between him and his peers. She said that despite this, one of his strengths is being able to model others, following in the gentle example set by artists and exploring his imagination from there.

"Flynn's imagination will not be the same as other children... but seeing that movement and imagination being modelled and suggested to him has really helped him learn."

Tuneful Chatter, like all of darts' programmes, is always participant-led. This means that the artist's delivery of sessions is guided by the participant, providing a space and safe environment for participants to take part in the session in the way that best suits their needs. Helena recognised that, with Freddie facing additional difficulties in interaction, this open, accessible style of delivery encouraging him to grow and thrive, taking Tuneful Chatter sessions at his own pace and exploring the activities that he could best connect with.

“For us, the biggest thing that has helped with that, for Flynn, is the fact that staff have been really understanding that he is developing a little differently to others, and they’re giving him that space... It has just been really welcoming and lovely.”

A final word...

“Freddie isn’t developing typically, but it [Tuneful Chatter] has definitely contributed to his development. We come in every week, it’s brilliant that it’s accessible for everybody – Flynn still has to wear nappies when we’re out and about, but the fact that you’ve got the accessible toilet upstairs [our Changing Places facility at The Point] is fantastic.”

“He’s coming away with a lot of language that he’s picking up here. And that is how Flynn will learn, and that’s brilliant because I know that he’s gaining new language and that is the impact for me, and for Flynn.”