

Library rhyme times and maternal mental health: Quick guide to the research



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Rhyme Times & Maternal Mental Health

This research project has been fuelled by the idea that library-based rhyme time sessions can be as much of benefit to mothers as they are for babies and toddlers.

It is widely recognised that library-based rhyme and story times are great for babies and toddlers. The songs and stories as well as the interaction with similar-aged children helps with pre-literacy learning and overall communication development. But many adults, especially mothers, say that attending a rhyme time is as enjoyable for them as it is for their children. In the context the growing concern nationally about maternal mental health and well-being we asked ourselves “could rhyme times be re-designed to provide as much benefit for mothers as they do for children?”

Maternal mental health and rhyme times

In the UK it is estimated one-in-five women during pregnancy or in the first year after the birth of their baby, experience mental health problems from mild or moderate depression and anxiety, to post-natal depression. Research also shows that first-time mothers are less likely to seek help compared to mothers who already have a child.

Almost every library service in the country runs regular rhyme and story times for under 5s which are open-access and free to attend. This makes rhyme times one of the most widespread and easily accessible forms of early years activity. We estimate that each year 4,000 to 5,000 individual mothers attend rhyme times in Essex alone. Based on the one-in-five figure, this means that each year across Essex rhyme times may reach up to 1,000 women experiencing maternal mental health problems. Should rhyme times therefore be seen not just as great early years activities, but also as a very large scale form of support for the mental health and well-being of mothers?

How was this research carried out?

In partnership with Essex libraries and funded by Arts Council England, this project explored whether by making some subtle changes or ‘modifications’ to rhyme sessions, they could be of more benefit to the mental health of the mothers who attend them.

Our project lasted 16 months and involved eight libraries that all hold 30-minute open access rhyme time sessions weekly or more frequently. Six were involved from February 2017; Basildon, Brentwood, Chelmsford, Clacton, Colchester, and Witham. Great Baddow and Braintree joined later.

Our first task was to design a series of evidence-based modifications aimed at benefiting the mental health of mothers and which could be easily incorporated into existing rhyme time sessions. These modifications were designed jointly with frontline library staff and a national expert group.

It was important that the modifications were evidence-based, so that there was some proven ‘theory’ behind why they might benefit mothers. For example, one modification was that every session should include a rhyme or song with face-to-face, synchronised movement and sounds (e.g. “row your boat”). This was based on evidence that synchronous maternal behaviour (movements, or vocalisation) is associated with increased maternal dopamine, and parent-child bonding.

Staff at each of the eight libraries chose which modifications to incorporate. The choice was up to them, but we did insist they implemented ‘new’ things they were not already doing. During the summer and autumn terms of 2017 the libraries tested the modifications while we gathered data from parents through surveys and discussions, and asked staff about their experiences.

Jointly with Essex library staff and our expert group, we set three research questions:

1 - Do the modified rhyme times have a positive effect on maternal mental health and if so, how and why? – we called this **IMPACT**

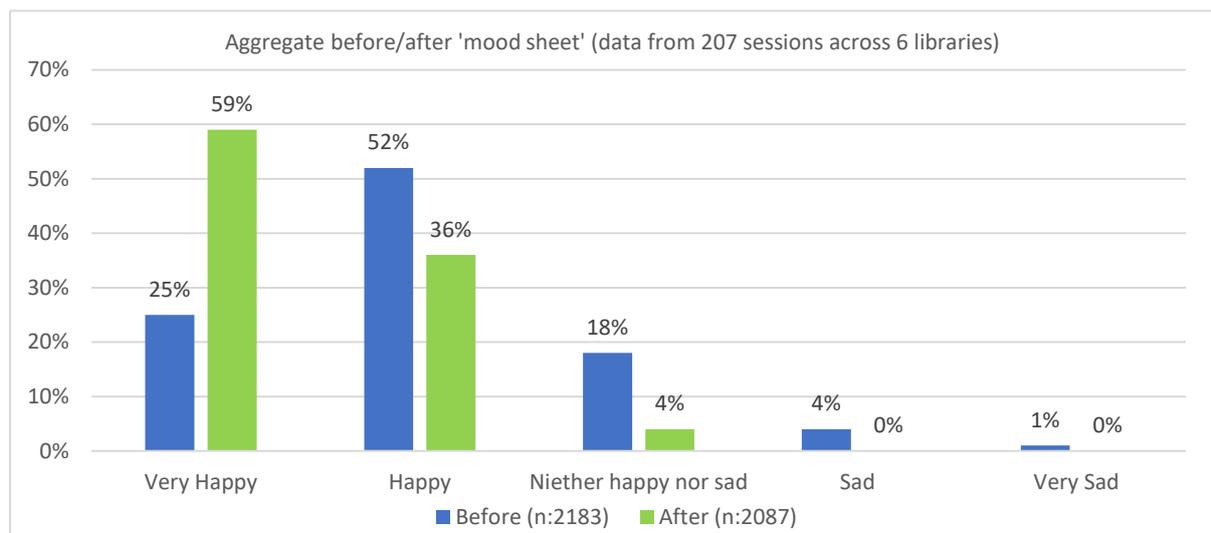
2 - What is the reach of these activities and can it be increased? - we called this **REACH**

3 - Can a more structured approach to rhyme times be implemented consistently in a public library context? - we called this **FIDELITY**

Here is what we found

IMPACT: We used simple data-gathering methods to record data from attendees at over 200 modified rhyme time sessions. Methods included 'mood charts' which parents marked with sticky dots on arrival and departure. We also held focus groups with parents and engaged some in phone interviews to find out about their personal experience of rhyme times.

The graph below shows the results from our mood chart data, where rhyme time attendees were asked to describe their mood at the start and end of a rhyme time session. This was done to find out if there was any immediate change in mood over the course of the session. What this shows is there is a very noticeable improvement in mood – with the percentage describing themselves as 'very happy' more than doubling from 25% to 59% in the space of 30 minutes.



From our focus groups and phone interviews with individual mothers who attended rhyme time we learned more about how rhyme times benefit maternal mental health and well-being:

- Promoting feelings of achievement through the simple act of having made the effort to get out of the house and then getting to the session successfully.
- Providing enjoyment from social singing and stories in a relaxed, welcoming setting.
- Providing interaction with other like-minded mothers and adults which helps combat feelings of loneliness, boredom and stress.
- Adding structure to the day, which helps with self-motivation and sense of control.
- Providing parents with a sense of enjoyment through seeing their child enjoy themselves.
- Reassuring mothers by enabling them to see children at different developmental stages.
- Giving sense of pride by seeing a child develop or do something praiseworthy (i.e. sharing).
- Improving personal confidence to go out, take part in activities and join in with singing and reading.

REACH: From data captured using sign-in sheets, we could see that rhyme times have a very broad reach, and that most people find out through family and friends:

- Almost three quarters of adults attending the sessions are mothers, and of these most are first-time mothers.
- People find out about rhyme times through friendship and social networks (libraries themselves are the next most common route to finding out).
- Rhyme times are attended by people from across the socio-economic spectrum including those living in some of the most deprived postcodes in Essex.
- Most of those attending rhyme times are already library users, which (if we assume library usership in the wider population to be around 20%-30%) leaves two-thirds or more of the population who could also be reached.
- The proportion of mothers finding out from a health visitor was small, but this could become an important way to find out especially for those with weaker social networks.
- In Essex, Registration Services have re-located into public libraries and this is another opportunity to market rhyme time beyond library members.

FIDELITY: Through interviews with library managers and the staff delivering the sessions we saw that the modified rhyme time sessions were being delivered in a disciplined and consistent way:

- This tells us rhyme times can be modified and can be delivered with a degree of consistency.
- We found that the level of consistency stemmed from library staff having a sense of ownership, and this came from their involvement in designing the modifications and their motivation to support maternal mental well-being.
- The modifications themselves were easy to teach and later in the project it only took 30 minutes to train new rhyme time staff in the modifications.
- The ability to understand maternal mental health, raise the issue without stigma and signpost was considered a key skill for library staff both by them and their managers.
- Among frontline staff there was a creative process of sharing practical details about delivery, discussing challenges and trying new methods (e.g. encouraging adults simply to say “hello” to each other when it transpired some felt shy introducing themselves by name) - this shows that the modifications can be improved further and that frontline staff are innovators.
- Our findings indicate additional impacts come from having all library staff, not just those involved in rhyme times, understand the benefits of rhyme times for mental health.
- Essex libraries have now made some of the modifications mainstream practice through revised training for staff across their 74 libraries. This is perhaps one of the most important immediate legacies of the project.

This research was undertaken by staff from Shared intelligence and Essex libraries, and funded by Arts Council England. Other publications from the research are available including a full research report and a toolkit for libraries. Find out more at www.sharedintelligence.net or from Charlotte.boulton@sharedintelligence.net