

Art at the Start

By [The University of Dundee](#)

Art at the Start is a collaborative project between art therapist Vicky Armstrong and experimental psychologist Dr Josephine Ross, based at the University of Dundee. The project investigates the role of shared art experiences in fostering strong attachment relationships and promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of young children. **It explores key questions such as:**

- How does creating art together with a caregiver influence a child's attachment relationships?
- What measurable impact does art-making have on early childhood development and well-being?

The project aims to build an evidence base demonstrating how participation in the arts during early childhood can contribute to positive behavioural changes and improved family relationships.

The project began with the introduction of Create Together, a series of art therapy groups developed by Vicky Armstrong. These groups focused on supporting parents and infants to engage in shared art-making experiences. Parents reported stronger bonds with their children and noticeable improvements in their relationships.

To measure these outcomes more formally, Vicky collaborated with Dr Josephine Ross, and together they established Art at the Start. This phase of the project introduced formal evaluation methods, including video analysis, to observe changes in interactions between parents and children. The findings revealed improved well-being and an increase in behaviours that support positive attachment relationships.

In collaboration with [Dundee Contemporary Arts \(DCA\)](#), Art at the Start expanded its focus to examine the social benefits of shared art experiences for families. **The research included:**

- Studying families with young children participating in DCA's arts activities.

- Evaluating the effectiveness of arts psychotherapy interventions for families with vulnerable attachment relationships.
- Providing art resources to families at risk of low well-being for use at home.

The project also emphasised public engagement, encouraging as many children aged 0–3 as possible to participate in creative activities. Observational data showed clear behavioural changes among families, illustrating the positive impact of art-making on parent-infant relationships and emotional well-being.

This work was recognised through the Fantastic for Families Impact Award (2020) and the Family Learning Health and Wellbeing Award (2021), reflecting its significant contribution to supporting families with young children.

The next phase of Art at the Start focused on scaling up the model across Scotland, supported by funding from the [Arts and Humanities Research Council \(AHRC\)](#). The aim was to use cultural assets to address health inequalities, with a focus on infant mental health.

Key activities included:

- Partnering with new cultural organisations, including Tramway (Glasgow), Taigh Chearsabhagh (Uist), and Dunfermline Carnegie Libraries and Gallery, alongside the original collaboration with DCA.
- Embedding art therapists within these sites to deliver parent-infant art therapy services.

- Developing outreach initiatives to engage communities traditionally underrepresented in galleries and arts programmes.

Collaborations were also formed with NHS perinatal and infant mental health teams in Greater Glasgow and Clyde, Lothian, and Highland, as well as with the charity [Cross Reach](#), which adopted the parent-infant art therapy model within its services.

This phase was supported by partnerships with organisations such as the [National Museum of Scotland](#) and the [Fruitmarket Gallery](#), demonstrating the potential of cross-sector collaboration to support infant mental health and reduce inequalities.

The project's **success in creating positive outcomes** has led to continued work in several areas:

- The partnership with Cross Reach remains active, further expanding the use of parent-infant group models.
- The DCA continues to fund art therapy services in collaboration with the Tayside Infant Mental Health Team, ensuring ongoing support for families.
- The second phase of AHRC-funded work involves collaboration with arts organisations, third-sector services, the Scottish Government, NHS teams, art therapists, and academics to explore art-based approaches for supporting infant mental health and addressing inequalities.

See more: [Art at the Start](#)

