

Art at the Start:  
University of Dundee and  
Dundee Contemporary Arts



**Winner of the Family Learning to  
Support Health and Wellbeing Award**

The Family Learning to Support Health and Wellbeing Award recognises organisations that best demonstrated innovative approaches to deliver family learning that supported health and wellbeing. This year's winner is **Art at the Start: University of Dundee and Dundee Contemporary Arts**.

## Overview

Art at the Start is a collaboration between University of Dundee and Dundee Contemporary Arts that explores the wellbeing benefits for very young children of making art together with their important grown-ups. They run and research parent-infant art therapy sessions as well as extensive public outreach to get as many 0-3s as possible making art. Art at the Start supported vulnerable families with home art boxes during the pandemic and then turned what they'd learned into a book, co-designed with families, full of ideas to help more families get started with early art making.

## The project

During covid all face-to-face work that Art at the Start were running ended. However, they were aware that vulnerable families still needed support, so they adapted their offering to support family wellbeing at home. They created art boxes which contained art materials, a guide with ideas for getting started, and activities to try that would encourage positive parent-infant connection.

The boxes were delivered to over 200 families where there had been a referral by health and third sector, regarding a concern for poor mental health and wellbeing during covid restrictions. The boxes encouraged positive interactions through art making. Ideas were simple, encouraging open ended playful art making, and materials were baby safe.

Following on from this, the team invited families who had taken part to help co-create a new book based on learning from the art boxes. When restrictions eased over summer 2021, 14 parents and their 0-3s joined an art-making session, developing ideas for the book. The book encourages parents to try art making with their baby or toddler and includes basic information about set up, safe materials and ideas for art making together.

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## The results

Over 200 art boxes were delivered to families and feedback showed that parents were more involved in play, their own wellbeing increased and they noticed positive behaviours from their babies, like shared attention and agency. 55% of families that were referred to the project were living in the most deprived areas of Scotland (based on Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) data) and 41% were from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The team learned that before receiving the art boxes, parents thought their babies were too young to try art making but saw the benefits when they tried it. This motivated the team to develop the boxes into a permanent book resource in a co-design project with families. 200 books with all the art materials needed were given to families across Dundee.

On winning the award, Vicky Armstrong, Art Therapist and Researcher for Art at the Start, said:

“We are delighted to have won this award among a great group of other shortlisted projects. We feel lucky to have been able to pivot our project to keep supporting families at home during the pandemic, and for that to then develop into a book made together with families has been a wonderful outcome for us. Art making together improves attachment relationships and the wellbeing of both parent and young child, so we hope to encourage as many families as possible to give it a go.”

## Next steps for Art at the Start: University of Dundee and Dundee Contemporary Arts

Art at the start have received further funding for books from the DCA and the University's Festival of the Future and will be working with voluntary organisations to get them to families. They have also received funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to expand their project and keep supporting families by basing art therapists in galleries and museums from Glasgow to Uist in the Outer Hebrides.