

Case Study

Accessible Professional
Development Opportunities
for Parents and Carers



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Overview

Company	Mercury Theatre Colchester
Type of Organisation	Theatre
	- ACE - NPO)
	- Producing
	- Non-touring
Contact at organisation*	Head of Operations
Benefitting Department	Creative Engagement – Mercury Creatives
Event / Production	Mercury Creative Programme
Provision	<i>Mercury Creatives</i> is a programme of professional development, taking the form of mentoring, upskilling events and networking, that includes supportive practices and resources to improve the engagement of parents and carers.
Extra Costs	Financial support packaged of £2,760 has been included in the <i>Mercury Creatives</i> programme budget to support parents and carers, and this will be increased in line with demand. Further details included under Budget .

Impact

When considering the overall impact of the additional support offered by the *Mercury Creative* programme to parents, the project team are incredibly pleased that no parent has needed to drop out of the programme, especially as a result of difficulties associated with the COVID pandemic. This suggests that the additional support provided and the regular contact and adjustments made with the project team have allowed parents to engage with the programme in a more flexible and family friendly manner.

Details

Provision:

Mercury Creatives is a professional development programme, funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) which offers professional development in the form of mentoring, upskilling events and networking opportunities to creative businesses, freelancers and self-employed artists based across Essex, East Sussex, Suffolk or Kent.

Each mentee of the *Mercury Creatives* programme receives 24 hours of one-to-one mentoring from an industry professional, who will assist them with their professional development. *Mercury Creatives* upskilling events cover core topics such as: Marketing, Financial management, Pitching to funders, and Intellectual property. In addition to upskilling events, the programme offers a series of networking and business showcase opportunities.

The Mercury Creatives programme is delivered alongside the wider Creative Engagement offering at the Mercury Theatre, Colchester.

The organisation reported that:

“The Mercury Theatre prides itself on being a theatre for all, therefore it was important to the Mercury Creatives project team to ensure that the programme did everything it could to support creative parents in their professional development. This has meant that during the planning stages of the programme and at regular intervals since, the project team have reviewed the offer of the programme to ensure it is fully accessible to creative parents.”

The *Mercury Creatives* programme currently has 22 parents with children who are under 18 years of age, currently engaged as beneficiaries of the programme. This is just over 30% of all the active beneficiaries.

In order to truly reflect the needs of the parents involved, the project team have at regular intervals collected feedback from the parents currently on the programme to ensure to additional support is helpful and fit for purpose. Examples of the additional support offered to all *Mercury Creative* parents and external delivery partners of the programme are as follow:

- Complimentary children’s workshops run alongside all professional development events and training sessions, as required
- Paid for childminding during online events for parents that require additional support to attend
- Complimentary meals and refreshments at all in-person events
- All mentees given the opportunity to complete all mentoring sessions remotely (even before COVID)
- Under 3’s welcome at all in-person mentoring meetings, events and training sessions
- All online sessions are recorded and made available for catch-up following the session
- All session leaders made aware that some attendees may come and go to care for their children, both online and in-person

- Additional private breakout space for parents to care for children at all events
- Total flexibility given to last minute changes to circumstances which may affect attendance at events and mentoring sessions.

By making these small adjustments to the *Mercury Creatives* programme offering, the organisations has been able maintain the engagement of all the enrolled parents.

Pre-planning & Logistics:

When considering the logistics of ensuring the *Mercury Creatives* programme continues to offer a high level of support to the programme beneficiaries who are parents, the following considerations have been made for each in-person event:

- Writing clear guidance in Mentee/Mentor handbook regarding accessibility for parents
- Planning engaging sessions with facilitators. For evening networking event – consider appropriate activities / changed event start time to ensure not too late finish
- Arrange and lead multiple events to ensure afternoon and evening offering available for all programme beneficiaries
- Informing all session delivery partners to expect delegates to included babes in arms
- Preparing additional space for children’s workshops and breakout rooms
- Booking children’s workshop facilitators – These are usually sourced with the support of the wider Creative Engagement team at the theatre.
- Sorting additional workshop resources for children (colouring sheets, games and music etc)
- Arranging refreshments.

As a result of the COVID pandemic, many in-person events have been moved online and as such, the following preparations have been made for each online event:

- Liaising with external care providers for childminding support
- Arrange and lead multiple events to ensure afternoon and evening offering available for all programme beneficiaries
- Informing all session delivery partners to expect delegates to include babies in arms or additional family noise in background of zoom calls

Resources:

In order to ensure the support offered to parents is engaging for the children in attendance at the Children's Workshops, the following additional resources were made available to those in attendance:

- 2 x Children's Workshop facilitators
- Fun children's worksheets
- Engaging games

Additional financial resources have been arranged within the budget to ensure full accessibility for creative parents on the programme can be covered at no expense to the enrolled mentees.

It should be noted that although a financial support package of £2,760 (as outlined above) has been included in the *Mercury Creatives* programme budget, this will be increased in line with demand.

Budget:

The *Mercury Creatives* budget has been reformatted to ensure costs associated with ensuring full accessibility for creative parents on the programme can be covered at no expense to the enrolled mentees.

A summary of these core costs are as follows:

Total financial support package budget = **£2,760**

- Children's Workshop facilitators – 2 x facilitators @ £26.00 (per hour/per facilitator) x 30 hours = **£1,560**
- Children's meal/refreshments = **£500** (to be increased as required)
- External Childcare services (during COVID pandemic) = **£600**
- Resource materials = **£100**
- Total financial support package budgeted = **£2,760**

It should be noted that although a financial support package of £2,760 has been included in the *Mercury Creatives* programme budget, this will be increased in line with demand. Additionally, the financial package runs alongside the other support offered by the project team, outlined above within the **Provision** section.

The Mercury Creatives budget has been carefully reformatted to ensure costs associated with ensuring full accessibility for Creative parents on the programme can be covered at no expense to the enrolled mentees.

Challenges:

Although the project team are pleased with the package of support available to help parents access the *Mercury Creatives* programme, a number of challenges have been identified, such as:

- Large sign up for childcare provision at each in-person event, which is often followed by a high last-minute drop-out rate due to sudden changes in child schedules.
- Changing the attitude of parents to think about including their children in the professional environment. Many didn't want to bring children in case they interrupted event for others, or how they would be perceived by doing so.
- Evening only events: when events can only take place in the evening, it has been challenging to consider appropriate activities that will be suitable for the time of day.

- Preparing engaging activities for Children's Workshops that incorporate a wide age range of children.

In addition to the challenges outlines above, the project team considered a number of other factors that may act as a barrier to creative parents engaging with the *Mercury Creative* programme. These included:

- Event start times
- School holiday commitments
- Childcare options
- Flexibility of Mentors time in response to Mentee

Solutions:

When considering how the identified challenges could be managed as part of the accessibility offering for parents on the *Mercury Creatives* programme, the project team implemented the following adjustments:

- Event start times – Where possible, events would be delivered twice. Once as a daytime session and again as an evening session. This adjustment saw the engagement of all creatives and not just parents increase drastically. 1 x afternoon session and 1 x evening session.
- School holiday commitments – Where possible, events and networking opportunities are not scheduled during school holidays and bank holidays. This is to enable maximum possibility of attendance from the 30% of beneficiaries who are parents. This helps maximise attendance as parents often need to focus solely on their children during holiday periods.
- Childcare options – The project team have offered parents who have advised they are unable to attend online events as a result of childcare issues support by covering the costs of their preferred childcare. This is usually offered on a case-by-case basis. This might include: covering the cost of external childminding services or altering event times to allow more suitable time to prepare or attend.

- Flexibility of mentors time in response to mentees – All mentees, irrespective of being a parent or not have been paired with a mentor of best fit. This includes factors such as; flexibility to change or cancel sessions and arrange mentoring sessions during unsociable hours.

Successes:

Since launching the programme in February 2020, the *Mercury Creatives* team and the wider Mercury Theatre have been incredibly pleased with the engagement of parents in the programme.

Of the 70 currently enrolled mentees on the programme, just over 30% are parents of children below the age of 18 years old. Since enrolling onto the programme, 2 creatives have become new parents. In all instances, the project team have seen no drop-outs from parents. This is considered a huge success, especially given the complexities of the last 12 months, which has seen many parents also tackle the responsibility of home schooling and working from home.

Additionally, at least two *Mercury Creative* mentees become new parents during their engagement with the programme and continued their mentoring sessions, following short breaks and small adjustments to the working hours.

Learning:

Although the project team are pleased with the support package that has been offered to date, they have highlighted a number of developments and process that will be implemented or adapted in the coming months. These include:

- Need to lead more regular check-ins with parents to check the support offered remains helpful and continues to reflect what they would like/need.
- Since launching the programme, the project team had to learn to be more open and flexible to sudden changes in availability.

- Ideally, work with wider Creative Engagement and Marketing teams to develop a children's resource pack to help keep children entertained during online Mercury Creatives sessions.
- Where possible, need to ensure all children's workshop attendees are separated into age-appropriate groups. Further, the team will ensure all activities, delivered by the session facilitators are suitable for all ages present.

Further Considerations:

It has been clear to the *Mercury Creatives* project team that in order to offer a fully accessible professional development programme for creatives parents, they must be prepared and open to sudden changes of availability.

Similarly, it has been crucial to take the time to listen to the parent's needs, rather than assuming what is required. It is well regarded that if an individual feels as though they are being listened to and supported, they will inevitably feel more engaged in the process they are undertaking. Further to this, the project team are adamant that it is important to actively support mentees rather than making it seem as though they are being supported, when in fact they are not.

As part of the programme formal obligations, the *Mercury Creatives* team have engaged ERS, a programme evaluator, to assess the impact of the *Mercury Creatives* programme. A full review of the parental support offer will be detailed in the final report, due for completion in August 2022. That said, there are a number of impactful changes that have already been noticed as a direct result of ensuring such a package.

Overall, the *Mercury Creatives* programme currently has 22 parents with children who are under 18 years of age, currently engaged as beneficiaries of the programme. This is just over 30% of all the active beneficiaries. The *Mercury Creatives* Programme have recruited a further 5 parents for the next cohort intake in March 2021.

By making the series of adjustments to the Mercury Creatives programme offering, as outlined above, the project team have been able maintain the engagement of all the enrolled parents.

Similarly, at least two *Mercury Creative* mentees become new parents during their engagement with the programme and continue their mentoring sessions, following short breaks and small adjustments to the working hours.

The Mercury Theatre is delighted to be able to support creative parents in their professional development.

Supporting Documentation

Example from mentee on The *Mercury Creative* Programme:

It should be noted, that the Mentee that has, arguably, made the most improvement in their creative practice during their time working on the programme is Hannah Aria, a neurodiverse mixed media artist.

Hannah is a single parent of two children, and during the programme has undergone significant professional development with the support of their personal mentor. Whilst on the programme, the outstanding steps that Hannah has taken in her professional/business development include, but are not limited to:

- Building confidence to own her creative identity as a neuro-diverse artist.
- Development of a community initiative in response to the COVID pandemic called 'Herd Community'. This has seen Hannah deliver a series of sessions online to encourage communities to recycle old plastic milk bottles by turning them into decorated elephants. (See attached document for examples)

- Awarded £28,932 of National Lottery Projects Grant by Arts Council England to deliver the following activities:
 - 16 weeks of art for wellbeing workshops
 - 4 social justice videos for multiple social media platforms
 - 16 live streams

Hannah has given the following feedback about the support offered by the Mercury Creatives programme:

“Mercury Creatives made sure that child care was not a barrier to me accessing training and support by providing both onsite childcare and (during lockdown and school closure) paying for private childcare arrangements. They really went the extra mile to ensure that I was included and actively looked for solutions when any obstacles arose. This is such a contrast to what I am used to. They made me feel valued and included in all provisions. As a single parent and especially during the pandemic, this was hugely appreciated. I have benefited so much from the programme”

There are many other mentees on the *Mercury Creatives* programme who are parents and have been offered additional support to ensure they can benefit fully from the programme. The *Mercury Creatives* project team, are committed to continue their work with all parents on the programme to develop and improve the accessibility of all events and opportunities.’

Other feedback the *Mercury Creatives* project team have received from creative parents include:

- *“One thing that I was the most impressed with was how encouraging you are to working parents by welcoming children along to the events, encouraging babies in arms and even have entertainment facilitators to keep the kids occupied. It is so refreshing to those of us struggling with the childcare/ work juggle. Thank you.”*
- *“Thank you for being amazing and changing my pitching time so last minute. My little one decided to have a tantrum just as I was about to join the call.”*

- *“Without the support of you and my mentor, I don’t think I would have been able to continue on the programme.”*
- *“The programme has been wonderful so far. Especially in how it adapted to the pandemic to give us more time on the programme. My business has come on a great deal in my time with the programme. I can't speak highly enough of it.”*
- *“Mercury Creatives has transformed my practice and launched me into a whole different sphere of influence and opportunities.”*

These resources were created with the knowledge and language we had at the time – we are always working to refresh these documents.

Some case-studies and how-to guides feature personal accounts written from the viewpoint of an individual. If you come across anything you'd like to flag with us, you can email programmes@pipacampaign.com



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