

Creative Transitions:

SUPPORTING QUEENSLAND WOMEN EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS TO REBUILD THEIR LIVES

ADVICE FOR DESIGNING A MUSIC PROGRAM

Creative Transitions was 12-month cross-sector pilot initiative designed to support women transitioning out of homelessness.

Delivered across four sites in Brisbane and Logan, including transitional housing and community-based settings, the program integrated trauma-informed, strengths-based music practices within existing service environments.

The program aimed to address a critical gap between crisis accommodation and stable housing, where isolation, instability, and limited engagement opportunities often persist, with significant implications for health and wellbeing for women and their children into the future.

For organisations seeking to implement a program like *Creative Transitions*, the key is not to replicate a model exactly but to embed the principles that make it effective.

This work begins with *relationships*, not activities.

1. START WITH PARTNERSHIPS

Focus on building strong collaborations between:

- Housing and homelessness services
- Health and wellbeing providers
- Qualified music facilitators (e.g. Registered Music Therapists [RMTs], registered with the Australian Music Therapy Association, or community music facilitators with experience working in trauma-informed ways).

These partnerships ensure the program is:

- Embedded in trusted environments
- Responsive to participant needs
- Supported by existing care systems.

Start where women already feel *safe*.

At the heart of this approach is the understanding that safety and trust are relational experiences. Just as strong partnerships create stable systems of support, participants benefit from environments that offer warmth, consistency, and a sense of containment, conditions that enable the nervous system to settle and engagement to occur.

2. CO-DESIGN WITH PARTICIPANTS

Programs should be shaped *with* participants, not *for* them. Music is most effective when participants have a high degree of choice and agency in what they play.

This means:

- Creating space for input and feedback
- Allowing flexibility in session content
- Responding to cultural, linguistic, and community considerations.

Put participants' *voices, choices, and agency* at the centre of design.

This process relies on attunement and paying close attention to participants' cues, rhythms, and preferences. Through shared attention and responsiveness, facilitators and participants develop a sense of connection and synchrony such that the program evolves organically in response to those involved.

An example of this in practice (embedding language in workshops):

Over several sessions at the Peggy's Place site, the group of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) women co-wrote their own song, "I Am Woman." In this workshop, they worked from shared lyric and chord sheets they had helped shape, revising the melody and harmony together. Each woman then translated the phrase "I am woman" into her own language and spoke it into the microphone, stepping into the role of leader and teacher and using the call-and-response pattern the lead music facilitator had modelled in an earlier drumming circle ("I go, you go"). Hearing their own words, in their own languages, amplified and echoed back by the group brought visible delight. The activity shows co-design in practice—the song, the languages, and the leadership all belonged to the participants, placing their voices, cultural identity, and agency at the centre of the program.

3. USE TRAUMA-INFORMED MUSIC PRACTICES

Music can be organically embedded in any context, but a program like *Creative Transitions* relied on the skills and experience of an RMT (registered with the Australian Music Therapy Association) with significant experience in trauma-informed facilitation.

Creative activity is most effective when it is:

- Safe and non-judgemental
- Flexible and participant-led
- Focused on expression, not performance or skill.

An example of a session structure follows.

STAGE	AIM	ACTIVITIES
Start of session	To regulate lower brain / turn on front brain, ground into body, orient to present, build group cohesion, reduce anxiety, and disrupt dissociative response	• Check-in (for adults, facilitated talking circle; for children, check-in in context of hello song, using thumb gestures—thumb up, down, middle—or zones of regulation) • Drumming • Body percussion • Rhythmic somatic movement including deep pressure (squeezing arms), light touch (tickling), and gentle stretching • Coordinated movement and dance (e.g. action songs for children, facilitated simple dance moves with or without instruments for adults) • Vocal warm-ups or group humming or toning
Mid-session	Activities utilising heavy cognitive front brain / executive function work only attempted once safety and regulation established	• Listening and reflection • Songwriting or storytelling • Instrument learning
End of Session	Relaxation after heavy brain work, reduce anxiety, post-session reflection and integration	• Mindful music play (gentle, rhythmic, imaginative, child-led/ improvisatory play using sensory props and instruments, e.g. ocean parachute, scarves, rain sticks, HAPI drum, recorded music) • Group singing (slow, gentle songs: for adults, slow, simple, preferred/well-known songs, e.g. “You Are My Sunshine”; for children, nursery rhymes or lullabies, e.g. “Twinkle, Twinkle”) • Check-out and discussion (for adults, facilitated talking circle and resource sheet for discussion; for children, check-out in context of goodbye song, using thumb gestures—thumb up, down, middle—or zones of regulation)

Prioritise *emotional safety* over outcomes.

Music is especially powerful because it naturally brings together key elements that support regulation and connection, such as soothing sounds, rhythm, movement, and shared experience. Whether through humming, drumming, or gentle rocking patterns with a child, these practices help calm the nervous system, build connection, and create moments of play, pleasure, and emotional release, all of which are central to healing.

An example of this in practice (First Nations carer and child dyad):

This example involved a First Nations grandparent–child dyad at the Slacks Creek YFS playgroup (supporting families in transitional housing). The lead music facilitator introduced an “ocean parachute” activity, which involved two pieces of blue satin sewn into a square, to embed cultural responsiveness. To Shellie Morris’s *Saltwater People Song*, participants (two staff, the lead music facilitator, the grandparent, and child T) began seated, creating gentle “ripples” in time with the sound of waves. The facilitator guided attention through soft prompts (“Can you hear the waves? Let’s make small ripples”), using mindfulness principles of orienting to sound, movement, and place. Movement gradually built with the music, from small ripples to larger waves, eventually transitioning to standing. At the musical crescendo, T moved beneath the parachute while adults lifted and lowered it in synchrony. In the second half, the facilitator introduced imaginative play, inviting T to select sea creatures (octopus, shark, crab) to “swim,” maintaining controlled movements so they “wouldn’t fall out.” The activity then returned to stillness, with T briefly enacting swimming in the fabric before settling. The session drew on Kline’s *8 Essentials of Healthy Attachment*, integrating predictable rhythm, soothing sensory input, synchronised group play, and cycles of activation and calming, all paced to T’s cues. In reflection, staff and the grandparent mapped the activity onto this framework, generating adaptations (e.g. an “octopus hunt”) and discussing sensory responsiveness. Staff noted that the framework articulated practices they already used intuitively and that they planned to embed them further. Following the session, staff created their own parachute; it became T’s preferred activity throughout and beyond the *Creative Transitions* program, continuing in playgroup sessions with family members.

An example of this in practice (working with CALD women):

At the Peggy’s Place site, working with women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, the lead music facilitator used the Latin rhythm of *Tabaco y Ron* (Greenwood Rhythm Coalition) as a pathway to regulation. The activity began with participants feeling and swaying to the drum-based opening. As the cowbell entered, they were invited to play along using handheld percussion. Simple, coordinated movements were then introduced, such as stepping forwards alternately, then lifting instruments overhead, guided by musical cues. This developed into structured circle work, with participants stepping towards the centre together (hands and instruments raised), then retreating with faster movement and playing, repeating the sequence. Partnered improvisation and mirroring further extended the musical and movement interaction. The facilitator later reflected that this became one of the most memorable moments of the program, marked by a strong sense of joy, connection, and shared laughter.



4. EMBED PROGRAMS IN PLACE

Deliver sessions on-site within existing services (e.g. housing providers, community hubs, playgroups).

This:

- Reduces barriers to access
- Supports consistent participation
- Enables integration into broader care.

Bring the *program to participants*, not the other way around.

Delivering programs in familiar environments reinforces a sense of felt safety and belonging, allowing participants to engage more openly. Being in a known space, surrounded by trusted people, strengthens the conditions needed for connection, co-regulation, and relational repair.

5. SUPPORT THE WORKFORCE

Equip support staff and music facilitators with:

- Trauma-informed training
- Understanding of creative health benefits
- Opportunities for collaboration and reflection.

Encourage integration into everyday practice.

Build capacity for sustainability by looking for ways to *build creative capacity* in current support staff.

Facilitators and staff are central to the success of this work. Their tone of voice, pacing, presence, and body language all shape the emotional environment. Small relational actions, such as soft eye contact, mirroring movement, or responding to a participant's rhythm, can foster deeper connection and help participants feel seen, supported, and safe.

An example of this in practice (staff upskilling):

During one session, the lead music facilitator used a quiet moment when the lone child participant left the circle to spend a short amount of time with her parent (who was changing her baby brother) to teach two support workers a simple song on the ukulele, using coloured stickers to mark the chord shapes and make it approachable. "I didn't know it was that easy!" one worker remarked. From there, the learning unfolded organically as staff began using song parody (i.e. inventing their own verses to a favourite song of the children called "Baby Shark"). By the end, both were planning to weave music into their everyday practice, showing how building creative capacity in existing support staff, rather than relying on visiting specialists alone, helps embed music as a lasting, relational tool within the services women and children already know and trust.



6. PLAN FOR FLEXIBILITY

Participants' lives may be complex and unpredictable.

Programs should:

- Allow for drop-in participation
- Adapt to changing group sizes and needs
- Work across varying levels of engagement.

Build for fluctuation
where consistent
support **matters**
more than consistent
participation.

Flexibility also allows programs to follow natural rhythms of energy and engagement. Alternating between active, stimulating experiences (e.g. drumming, movement, laughter) and quiet, calming moments (e.g. listening, reflection, gentle music) helps regulate the nervous system and prevents overwhelm, supporting sustained participation over time.

7. CAPTURE IMPACT IN MEANINGFUL WAYS

Measure program outcomes by documenting:

- Participant experiences and reflections
- Creative outputs (songs, art, storytelling)
- Observed changes in confidence, connection, and wellbeing.

Value *lived experience*
and creative artefacts
as evidence.

Creative outputs often provide a window into change that traditional health measures cannot always readily capture. Moments of shared rhythm, laughter, expression, and connection reflect deeper shifts in regulation, relational capacity, and a sense of self, all of which are critical indicators of wellbeing and recovery.



KEY PRINCIPLES

What matters is creating conditions where women can:

- Feel safe
- Express themselves
- Connect with others
- Rebuild a sense of self and possibility.

These conditions are built through consistent, attuned, and relational experiences, where safety, connection, rhythm, and play come together to support healing.

SUMMARY: WHERE TO START

For organisations wanting to implement a program like this:

Start simple

- One site
- A consistent and qualified music facilitator
- A consistent session time
- Support staff familiar to the participants

Focus on foundations before scale

- Build trusted partnerships
- Embed in safe, familiar environments
- Co-design with participants from the beginning

Use music as a relational tool, not a performance outcome

- Prioritise safety, expression, and connection
- Offer multiple ways to engage (no pressure to perform)
- Use rhythm, voice, and movement to support regulation and engagement

Work with, not against, complexity

- Expect fluctuating attendance
- Design for flexibility and responsiveness
- Meet participants where they are

Embed attachment-informed practice

- Create safety through calm, consistent presence
- Foster attunement through shared rhythm and responsiveness
- Incorporate movement, play, and joy as part of healing
- Balance activation and calm to support regulation

IN SUMMARY

Programs like *Creative Transitions* are effective because they create environments where participants experience:

- Safety in their bodies
- Connection with others
- Agency in expression
- Moments of joy and possibility.

When these conditions are
present, healing, wellbeing,
and re-engagement
naturally follow.

Creative Transitions is led by Griffith University in partnership with Queensland Women and Girls' Health Promotion Program and delivery partners Peggy's Place, Lady Musgrave Trust, and YFS.

To read the full report: Bartleet, B.-L., Dunston, S., Myers, L., Heard, E., & Way, A. (2026). *Creative Transitions: Supporting Queensland Women Experiencing Homelessness to Rebuild Their Lives* [Final Report]. Creative Arts Research Institute, Griffith University.

To view all the Creative Transitions resources, visit our website: <https://creativetransitions.org>.

For additional information, contact the *Creative Transitions* Project Leader, Professor Brydie-Leigh Bartleet: b.bartleet@griffith.edu.au

