CULTURE KIDS

RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT REPORT

A BOLD INVITATION TO CREATIVITY, CONNECTION, AND BELONGING – BEGINNING AT BIRTH

REPORT BY
CHARLOTTE IS CREATIVE

COMMISSIONED BY
THE GAMBRELL FOUNDATION

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why Culture Kids Matters to Charlotte

Following an exploratory trip to Nordic countries sponsored by The Gambrell Foundation in 2023, Charlotte Is Creative (CIC) became involved in the Culture Kids research and development process because the concept speaks directly to urgent challenges and opportunities we see in Charlotte today. Inspired by Helsinki's Culture Kids initiative, the concept reimagines how cities welcome children and families into cultural life from the very beginning. It positions early access to the arts as foundational and essential to healthy development, family wellness, and community connection.

In Helsinki, Culture Kids is a universal, proactive program that invites families through trusted health care touchpoints, into sustained relationships with arts and culture organizations starting at birth. The result is not only increased arts engagement, but stronger social bonds, improved well-being, and a shared sense of belonging across the city.

Charlotte faces its own distinct realities, but the core principles of Culture Kids resonate deeply here. Our city is recognized as a great place to raise a family, yet many caregivers report isolation, stress, and difficulty accessing affordable, welcoming opportunities for young children. Arts organizations offer meaningful programs, but families may not know they exist, may not feel they are "for them," or may face logistical barriers that prevent participation. Culture Kids offers a framework for addressing these challenges in a coordinated, inclusive way.

Culture Kids positions early access to the arts as foundational and essential to healthy development, family wellness, and community connection.

For CIC, Culture Kids aligns with our long-standing commitment to using creativity as a tool for connection. It also aligns with our experience working across sectors, particularly in arts and health, where we have seen firsthand how creative experiences can support emotional well-being, reduce isolation, and strengthen relationships.

We believe in Culture Kids for Charlotte because it reflects a vision of the city where belonging starts early. A city where families are welcomed into cultural life from the moment a child is born. A city where creativity is woven into everyday experiences, not reserved for those with time, money, or familiarity with cultural institutions.

Culture Kids has the potential to strengthen families, support healthy brain development and academic readiness, reduce isolation, and create lasting relationships between communities and cultural organizations. It also offers arts organizations an opportunity to collaborate rather than compete, to build new audiences, and to deepen their relevance within the lives of families.

This report represents a first step. It captures what we have learned, what we have heard, and what we believe is possible. Charlotte Is Creative is proud to be part of this exploration, alongside a broad and passionate group of partners. Together, we are asking a simple but transformative question: **What if every child in Charlotte began life with an invitation to creativity, connection, and belonging?**

THE VISION: Launch a five-year, cohort-based Culture Kids pilot beginning at birth.

The Culture Kids pilot would follow a cohort of children and caregivers from birth through age five – grounded in the belief that arts are for everyone and that early access to arts and culture is foundational to child development, family well-being, belonging, and long-term social connectedness.

01

Position Culture Kids as a wraparound approach to child and family well-being.
Frame the pilot as a cross-sector model integrating arts, health, and community supports – using joy and creative experiences to complement traditional approaches to wellness.

02

Engage a rotating network of arts organizations supported by shared infrastructure.
Partner with 6-12 lead arts organizations that rotate monthly across pilot sites, supported by Culture Kids funding, training in early childhood development, and a shared framework for delivering age-appropriate creative experiences.

03

Establish a predictable, monthly cadence rooted in trusted neighborhood spaces.
Partner with libraries and community spaces as primary anchor sites for monthly "Culture Kids Saturdays," providing families with a consistent time, place, and format that supports habit-building and accessibility during the earliest years of development.

04

Extend Culture Kids into spaces where families already are.
Complement monthly programming with experiences embedded in familiar settings – community events, Pre-K registration sites, mobile health clinics – to reduce barriers and invite families into moments of joy, creativity and connection where they already gather.

05

Use the pilot to test a bold, universal civic commitment and measure its impact on individual and community well-being.
Position Culture Kids as an exploration of how early arts access can become a bedrock for families, while intentionally measuring impacts on child development, family well-being, social connection, and sense of belonging.

Through this learning-focused pilot, Culture Kids aims to strengthen quality of life, contribute to Charlotte's identity as a place families choose to live, and offer a model for other communities seeking to understand the long-term well-being impacts of integrating the arts into early childhood.

*This pilot offers Charlotte-Mecklenburg an opportunity to lead nationally – demonstrating how **creativity, when treated as essential rather than optional, can strengthen families and communities**. It positions **Charlotte as a city willing to make a bold promise to its youngest residents**: you belong here, and we're investing in your future.*

LETTER FROM THE GAMBRELL FOUNDATION



What if every child began life with an open invitation for their family to create connection through the arts?

That question has stayed with me since we encountered Helsinki's Culture Kids program and saw a remarkable idea in action. Rather than waiting for families to discover cultural opportunities on their own, the city brings creativity to them from birth, building an ongoing relationship with art, music, movement, storytelling, and community.

I was captivated by the simplicity and ambition of that idea.

At The Gambrell Foundation, we are drawn to work that asks us to reconsider what we treat as essential to a good life. Creativity is too often viewed as an enrichment, something wonderful when time, resources, or access allow, but what if we looked at it as foundational? A deeper connection to the cultural fabric of the city would change how children learn and grow, families connect, and communities build a deeper sense of belonging.

That possibility is why we commissioned Charlotte is Creative to explore what a Culture Kids model could be for Charlotte.

Charlotte has its own families, institutions, strengths, challenges, and extraordinary creative community. We have the opportunity to learn from this model, then invite the people who know this city best to imagine something uniquely our own.

This report is an important first step in that process. It brings together research, local realities, and an ambitious vision for a five-year pilot program that could welcome children into Charlotte's cultural life from the very beginning.

What excites me most is not simply the prospect of increasing participation in the arts, but what can grow from that access, like confidence, connection, family well-being, and the knowledge that the creative life of a city belongs to *everyone*.

We have an opportunity to make a powerful promise to our youngest residents and their families, showing them that: creativity is for you, community is for you, and you have a place in the soul of this city.

I hope this report inspires you to join us in imagining what might be possible when belonging begins at birth.

- Sally Gambrell Bridgford, CEO, The Gambrell Foundation

THE GAMBRELL FOUNDATION

Photo: Chuck Peebles

ABOUT THE PROJECT TEAM: CHARLOTTE IS CREATIVE

Charlotte Is Creative (CIC), founded in 2015 by Tim Miner and Matt Olin, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening Charlotte's creative ecosystem by supporting emerging artists, creative entrepreneurs, and the communities they serve. Since its founding, CIC has worked to ensure that creativity is not treated as a luxury or an afterthought, but as a vital contributor to civic life, economic opportunity, health, and belonging.

At its core, Charlotte Is Creative exists to help people form meaningful connections with their city and with one another through creative expression. **We believe that when creativity is accessible, visible, and valued, communities are healthier, more connected, and more resilient.** This belief has guided our work across disciplines, neighborhoods, and sectors, from grassroots artist support to large-scale public-private collaborations.

Charlotte is one of the fastest-growing cities in the country. According to the latest report by Charlotte Regional Business Alliance, 157 people move here every day, bringing with them diverse cultural backgrounds, lived experiences, and creative traditions. While growth brings opportunity, it also brings challenges: fragmentation, isolation, and uneven access to resources. CIC's work is grounded in the conviction that creativity can serve as a connective tissue in a rapidly changing city, helping people feel welcomed, seen, and invested in the place they call home.



Grant Funding Power Panel



Tim Miner & Matt Olin, Co-Founders of Charlotte is Creative

What We Do and Why We Do It

Charlotte Is Creative operates at the intersection of arts, community, and systems change. **Our work focuses on four interconnected areas: providing knowledge and training for creatives, expanding access to resources and funding, building community and social capital, and fostering cross-sector collaboration.** These efforts are designed not only to support individual creatives, but to strengthen the broader ecosystem in which creativity can thrive.

We partner with artists, cultural organizations, educators, healthcare providers, local government, and community groups to co-create initiatives that respond to real needs. Whether supporting creative entrepreneurs, embedding artists in healthcare settings, or facilitating connections across sectors, our approach is rooted in listening, collaboration, and shared ownership.

Photos: Oxana Erokhina (L), Logan Cyrus (R)



Underlying all of this work is a simple but powerful belief: **creativity belongs to everyone**. Access to the arts should not depend on zip code, income, or prior exposure. Too often, arts participation is shaped by barriers that exclude families and communities who could benefit the most. CIC's role is to help lower those barriers by designing systems, partnerships, and programs that invite people in rather than ask them to opt in on their own. We're also interested in supporting individual creatives and grassroots arts organizations in diversifying their revenue streams for career stabilization, and we see Culture Kids as an innovative new way to add to this goal.



CreativeMornings/Charlotte

Why Charlotte Is Creative Is Exploring Culture Kids

Charlotte Is Creative's role in the Culture Kids Research & Development (R&D) phase is not to import a program wholesale, but to help explore what a Charlotte-specific version could look like. Our responsibility has been to convene stakeholders, listen deeply, and surface insights that reflect the lived realities of families, arts organizations, health partners, and community leaders.

Through one-on-one conversations, group convenings, parent/caregiver surveys, and research, CIC has helped facilitate a process rooted in co-creation rather than prescription. **We believe that for Culture Kids to succeed in Charlotte, it must be shaped by the people who will carry it forward: families, artists, educators, healthcare providers, and community organizations.** This research and development phase has been about learning together, identifying opportunities, and naming concerns early, so that any future pilot is grounded, equitable, and sustainable.

CIC also brings experience navigating complex partnerships. Culture Kids requires coordination across sectors that do not always work closely together, from arts and culture to health, education, and public systems. Our existing relationships and collaborative track record position us to help bridge these worlds, fostering trust and shared purpose.

Photo: Heather Liebler

AUTHOR STATEMENT - MATT OLIN



As a boy growing up in Charlotte, I "cracked open" as a creative person while spending time inside the creaky halls of the original Children's Theatre of Charlotte on Morehead Street. Those Saturday afternoon classes, the smell of sawdust from set construction, the thrill of stepping onto a stage. I was lucky. My parents encouraged my creative curiosities and did what they could to help me explore them, whether that meant driving me to theater rehearsals, supporting my interest in music and improv, or simply making space for me to write and create visual art.

These experiences didn't just fill my childhood—they shaped me into the person I am today. They taught me collaboration, work ethic, and the courage to take creative risks. They showed me that the arts aren't separate from "real life" but are essential tools for understanding ourselves and connecting with others. Those formative experiences eventually led me to a fulfilling career in the arts and culture sector, including co-founding Charlotte Is Creative, where my team and I have spent years working to ensure Charlotteans have access to the transformative power of creativity and creative career paths.

Now, as a parent myself, I've watched these same benefits unfold in my daughter's life. Early access to arts experiences has helped shape her into a smart, creative, empathetic, and kind young woman. I see how artistic expression gives her language for her emotions, how collaborative projects teach her about community, and how creative problem-solving builds her brain and confidence to tackle challenges in all areas of her life.

When I first encountered Helsinki's Culture Kids program during our travels to Finland with The Gambrell Foundation, I felt an immediate spark of excitement and hope—this was exactly the kind of transformative initiative that our community back home needed. What captivated my fellow travelers and me was the program's fundamental belief that every child deserves access to arts experiences from their earliest years—not as a luxury, but as an essential part of healthy development and family well-being. By partnering with trusted healthcare providers and leveraging the collaborative spirit of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's arts ecosystem, our very own version of Culture Kids could remove barriers and meet families exactly where they are in life's most formative chapters.

Our vibrant creative community, which I've seen firsthand through my work with Charlotte Is Creative, has the passion and talent to provide these life-changing experiences to our youngest residents—in ways that honor our community's diverse character while demonstrating how inclusive arts programming can have a holistic impact on our entire lives. By integrating health and wellness resources into these cultural experiences, we can create touchpoints where families encounter artistic awe, vital support services, and each other.

Every child born here—regardless of their family's income, background, or neighborhood—deserves the opportunity to build lasting relationships with creativity, discover joy through artistic expression, and reap the cognitive, emotional, and social benefits that arts engagement can provide during those critical early years. Here's to harnessing the powerful interconnection between arts, health, and community well-being!

- MATT OLIN, Executive Director, Charlotte Is Creative

Photo: Corine Olarte Creative Co.

AUTHOR STATEMENT – SETU RAVAL



I grew up in a household where art was not an extracurricular, but rather a way of life. On Saturday mornings, Jagjit Singh's ghazals played softly through the house. Gujarati literature filled the bookshelves. Our living room was regularly cleared so I could practice Bharatanatyam dance. From the corners of our home, the vibrations of Indian ragas projected from my mother's voice as she sang. Art was treasured.

There are cassette tapes from when I was two years old, shortly after we immigrated to the United States – snow falling outside our small apartment, my mother singing Indian nursery rhymes to me. Those moments were about connection, comfort, and belonging. Art was how she communicated love, how she grounded us in a new place, and how she helped me make sense of the world. Just a few weeks ago, I walked into my mother's home and heard that same voice echoing through the house – but this time, it was my children who were reaping the benefits.

That early exposure to the arts directly influenced my educational and professional path. I studied film producing at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts and spent over a decade in Los Angeles working in artist-focused roles at organizations including Sundance Institute and Film Independent – where I led grantmaking and programs such as the nominations process for the Film Independent Spirit Awards. That same commitment now guides my work at Charlotte Is Creative and as Board Chair of the Independent Picture House, Charlotte's only nonprofit cinema.

I have experienced firsthand how early exposure to the arts fosters belonging, creates unexpected connections, and supports mental and emotional well-being. I know in my core that these benefits are real – and I believe that *every child* and family deserves access to them.

Growing up, I experienced Charlotte through its arts and culture festivals like the Greek Festival, Festival of India, and Festival in the Park. Families from different backgrounds came together around shared experiences, building pride not only in their cultures, but in the city itself. Those moments shaped my values. I am a proud Charlottean – proud of the city's open arms, its collaborative spirit, and its rich diversity of voices and traditions. I believe a program like Culture Kids can help nurture more proud Charlotteans: children and families who feel connected to one another and invested in the future of this place.

When I first heard about Culture Kids, the hairs on my neck stood up. The idea was simple, yet profound: an invitation for families to engage with the arts from the very beginning of life. Like many others I shared it with, it felt like a no-brainer for Charlotte – a city where so many people choose to raise families. My husband and I made that choice ourselves, relocating from Los Angeles because we believed Charlotte offered a quality of life we wanted for our children. Thousands of families make that same decision every year. Imagine if Culture Kids were part of that welcome – a shared civic promise. An introduction to the city not defined by the job that brought a family here, but by the quality of life that awaits them.

It has been a joy to explore this vision alongside The Gambrell Foundation, Charlotte Is Creative, and the many spirited partners engaged during this research and development phase. Programs like Culture Kids, and the collective commitment behind them, give me optimism for Charlotte's future and for the generations who will call this city home.

– SETU RAVAL, Director of Programs & Strategy, Charlotte Is Creative

Photo: Uptown Views Media

WHY EARLY ARTS ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

The earliest years of life are a period of extraordinary growth. **From birth through age five, a child's brain develops more rapidly than at any other time, forming neural connections that shape learning, emotional regulation, social skills, and overall well-being.** During this window, experiences matter deeply. The environments children are exposed to, the relationships they form, and the sensory and emotional inputs they receive all play a role in laying the groundwork for lifelong development.



"Culture doesn't scream Right! or Wrong! but it asks What if? Shall we try? Do you dare? and therefore gives the child freedom of action and opportunities for creativity. And in addition, as a side effect, it also provides cognitive benefits for the development of the child's attentiveness, language functions and emotional skills. So let's let the children freely get excited about culture."
- Minna Huotilainen, professor, University of Helsinki

Across disciplines including neuroscience, public health, education, and psychology, research increasingly demonstrates that early engagement with the arts is not simply enrichment. It is foundational. Artistic experiences activate multiple areas of the brain simultaneously, engaging sensory perception, motor coordination, memory, language, emotion, and social interaction.

Music, movement, visual art, storytelling, and imaginative play help children develop executive function skills such as focus, impulse control, and flexible thinking. These same skills are closely tied to school readiness, academic success, and emotional resilience later in life.

Globally, this understanding has led to a growing recognition of the arts as a public good, particularly in early childhood. International bodies such as the World Health Organization have documented links between arts engagement and improved cognitive development, social-emotional learning, and mental health outcomes. Arts participation has also been associated with increased resilience, stronger social bonds, and a greater sense of agency across the lifespan. In short, creative experiences help children not only learn, but adapt, connect, and thrive.

Photo: GETTY, Forbes Article: *Art After Stroke Shows That Creativity Uses Both Sides Of Your Brain*

Importantly, the benefits of early arts engagement extend beyond children alone. **Shared creative experiences strengthen relationships between parents/caregivers and children, offering joyful, low-pressure opportunities for connection. They also create space for parents/caregivers to build social ties with one another, helping to reduce isolation during what can be an intensely demanding period of life.** At a time when loneliness and caregiver stress are increasingly recognized as public health concerns, arts-based experiences offer a powerful, preventive approach that supports whole-family wellness.

> *"Social connection is a fundamental human need, as essential as food, water, and shelter."*
> *— U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy*

Locally, Charlotte reflects many of the same dynamics seen nationally and globally. Families are navigating busy schedules, economic pressures, and limited time for connection. While the city is rich in cultural offerings, access to those experiences is uneven. Awareness gaps, transportation challenges, cost, and perceptions about who arts spaces are "for" can all limit participation, especially for families with very young children.

Yet Charlotte also has significant strengths. Arts organizations, libraries, schools, early learning providers, and community groups are already doing meaningful work with children and families. Many have developed innovative programs that integrate creativity into learning, literacy, and social development. What is often missing is a coordinated, universal entry point that helps families discover these opportunities early and feel welcomed into them over time.



What is often missing is a coordinated, universal entry point that helps families discover these opportunities early and feel welcomed into them over time.

Early arts engagement matters because it shapes how children see themselves, how families connect to one another, and how communities form shared identity. **When access to creativity begins early and is reinforced consistently, it sends a clear message: culture belongs to everyone, and every child deserves an invitation to participate.**

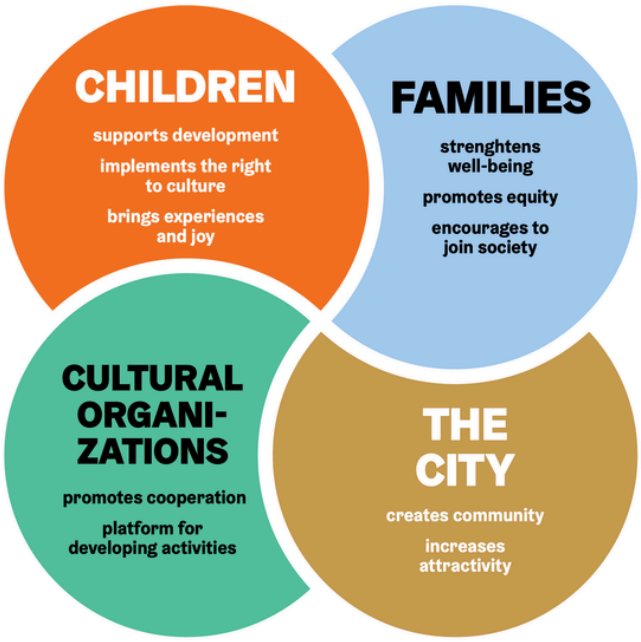
INSPIRATION FROM HELSINKI

Helsinki's Culture Kids Model



The Culture Kids model originated in Helsinki, Finland, as a citywide commitment to welcoming children and families into cultural life from the very beginning. **Developed through a public-private collaboration, Culture Kids offers every child born in Helsinki a relationship with arts and cultural organizations from birth until school age.** Families are invited through trusted healthcare touchpoints, such as maternity and child health clinics, ensuring that participation is universal, proactive, and equitable.

Rather than relying on families to seek out arts programming on their own, Culture Kids flips the model. Participation is normalized, free, and embedded into systems families already use. Each child is connected with age-appropriate cultural experiences over several years, building familiarity, trust, and a sense of belonging. Importantly, Culture Kids is not about a single event or exposure. It is about continuity, relationship-building, and repeated invitations into creative life.



"In spring 2024, around 70% of children born in 2020, 2021 and 2022 were registered as Culture Kids.

More than 22% of the participants in the programme were speakers of non-native languages, a higher proportion than the population average. Family satisfaction with the events averages 4.6 out of 5.

The programme is a partnership between the city, cultural operators and a foundation.

In 2024, when five out of the seven age groups are involved, a total of 880 Culture Kids events will have been organized, involving 21,146 Culture Kids with a close adult, i.e. a total of 42,292 people."

- The Captivating Culture Kids Report

Photo: Culture Kids Helsinki: N2 Albiino | Diagram: The Captivating Culture Kids Report

The outcomes in Helsinki are instructive. A large majority of families engage with the program, and thousands of children have participated since its launch. **Arts organizations benefit from deeper relationships with families and a clearer sense of their role in civic life. Families report feeling welcomed and supported, while children experience culture as a natural part of everyday living rather than something reserved for special occasions or certain audiences.**

While the Helsinki Culture Kids model is widely regarded as successful, there is relatively limited measurement and data available to quantify its impact. This is not due to a lack of value, but rather **a reflection of a cultural context in which the arts are inherently understood as essential to child development and community well-being without the need to consistently prove their worth through metrics.** As we explored this model, we found ourselves both challenged and inspired by this reality. In Charlotte, we often feel the pressure to make the case through data, yet there is also a desire to trust what we know intuitively: that meaningful, early connections to the arts matter.









What makes the Helsinki model particularly compelling is its integration across sectors. **Culture Kids sits at the intersection of arts, health, education, and social services. It recognizes that creative experiences contribute not only to cultural participation, but also to public health, social cohesion, and long-term educational outcomes.** By embedding arts engagement into early childhood systems, Helsinki has created a framework that supports both individual development and collective well-being.

At the same time, the Culture Kids model is not intended to be copied wholesale. Helsinki's social infrastructure, funding mechanisms, and cultural policies differ significantly from those in U.S. cities like Charlotte. The value of the model lies not in its exact structure, but in its core principles: universality, equity, early intervention, cross-sector collaboration, and sustained engagement.

For Charlotte, the Helsinki experience offers inspiration and a provocation. It invites us to imagine what it would look like to treat early arts engagement as essential rather than optional, and to design systems that reach families before barriers emerge. It challenges us to consider how creativity might serve as a shared language across neighborhoods, cultures, and generations.

Photo (Left to Right): by Riku Virtanen, Cata Portin, Suvi-Tuuli Kankaanpää - Helsinki Culture Kids Experiences

Helsinki's Culture Kids Financing Structure

Helsinki's Culture Kids program is built on a shared investment model that blends public funding, private philanthropy, and direct participation from cultural institutions. The primary funders include the City of Helsinki, the Jane and Aatos Erkko Foundation, and participating arts, culture, and sports organizations. **From the program's inception, the Jane and Aatos Erkko Foundation has played a catalytic role, providing multi-year philanthropic support that enabled Culture Kids to expand from a small, single-cohort pilot into a citywide service reaching all children under school age.** This philanthropic investment is administered through the City of Helsinki, which distributes funds to participating organizations and ensures alignment with broader civic priorities.

Structure and basis of calculation of operating costs:

- xxxx children will be born in year xxxx.
- 70% of them register as Culture Kids during the first 4 years of age. In the first year, around 35% of the age group enrols, after which the number rises steadily.
- 60% of those enrolled attend the events twice a year = number of children attending the events.
- Sponsors are subsidised €16.5 per child attending the events.

In addition to the costs of the events, please note:

- Communication and marketing
- Registration and enrolment platform (= website)
- Salary costs of the staff responsible for the whole project
- Development and evaluation costs

Cost Structure: The Captivating Culture Kids Report

The City of Helsinki covers core infrastructure and coordination costs, including program staffing, communications, and the digital platform used for invitations and registration. Participating arts and culture organizations receive a per-child grant (€16.5 per child in 2024), administered through the city. Notably, reporting from the program's early years shows that participating organizations typically invest an amount comparable to the grant they receive, effectively sharing costs between the funder and the arts and culture institutions. This model has supported free access for children. Additional targeted public funding has supported content development and enhancing cultural diversity to ensure families from different backgrounds find the program accessible.

Annual costs of the Culture Kids program in 2023

The City of Helsinki (includes coordinator's salary, communication activities, IT development and maintenance)	$128,000
Jane and Aatos Erkko Foundation (covers the costs for each child's participation in two events annually at $17.90 per event)	$366,000
Culture and art organizations (covers administration, purchases, and staff time, as well as participation of a family member in two events annually)	$391,000
Total cost (2023)	$885,000

Cost Breakdown: Acts of Purpose Report

ALIGNMENT WITH CITY AND COUNTY PRIORITIES

Charlotte is at a defining moment in its growth. As one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States, it continues to attract new residents, families, and talent at a rapid pace. This net migration growth brings vitality and opportunity, but it also raises urgent questions about belonging, equity, and connection. **In a city shaped by constant change, how do families build roots? How do children grow up feeling that they belong to something larger than themselves?**

At both the city and county levels, leaders have articulated a shared vision centered on belonging, opportunity, health, and long-term prosperity. While these priorities are often expressed through different systems and strategies, they converge around a common understanding: early investment in people, families, and community connection is essential to Charlotte's future.

Culture Kids aligns directly with stated priorities of both the City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County, offering a practical, community-centered way to advance shared goals across health, education, equity, and quality of life.

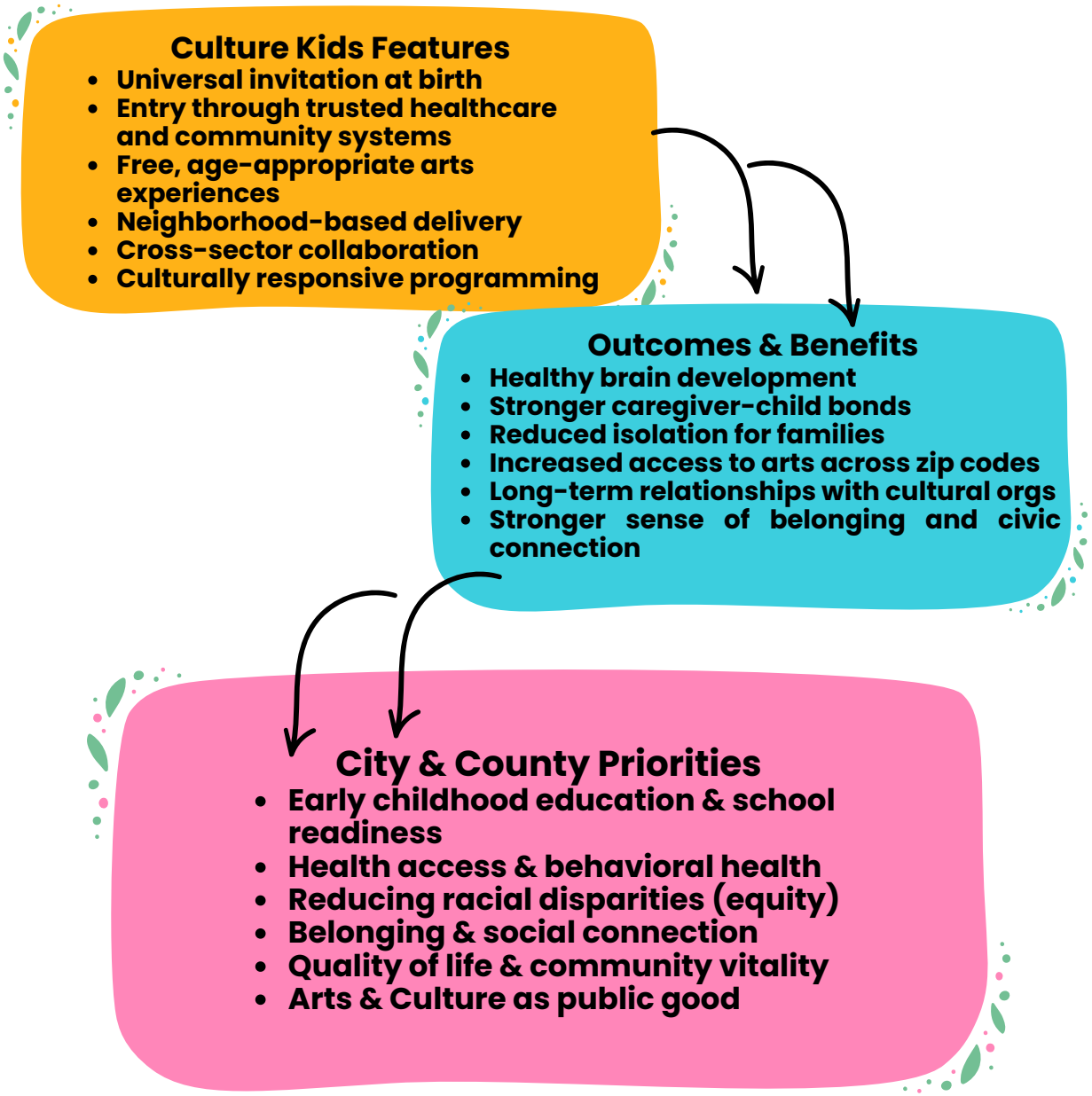


At the county level, **Mecklenburg County's FY 2025 priorities emphasize health access, early childhood education, reducing racial disparities, and strengthening community supports.** These priorities reflect a growing recognition that long-term outcomes are shaped early, and that preventive, upstream approaches are critical to building a healthier, more equitable county. By introducing families to community-based creative experiences beginning at birth, Culture Kids supports early brain development, strengthens caregiver-child bonds, and helps reduce social isolation, outcomes that closely mirror the County's goals around educational attainment, behavioral health, and equity.

At the city level, **Charlotte's strategic direction places strong emphasis on belonging, inclusive growth, neighborhood-based access to services, and quality of life for residents.** As the city grows, leaders have increasingly acknowledged that infrastructure alone does not create community. Social connection, cultural expression, and shared experiences are essential ingredients in making Charlotte a place where people feel welcomed and invested.

Image: Ali Loncar, Charlotte Artist

How Culture Kids Advances Charlotte-Mecklenburg Priorities



Culture Kids speaks directly to this moment. By embedding early childhood arts experiences in trusted, convenient, everyday spaces such as healthcare settings, libraries, and community hubs, the program meets families where they already are. It reduces barriers to participation and ensures that access to creativity is not dependent on income, familiarity with cultural institutions, or geography. In doing so, Culture Kids advances the City's broader goals around inclusion, neighborhood vitality, and creating pathways for families to engage meaningfully in civic life.

Together, City and County priorities reflect a shared understanding that well-being, opportunity, and belonging are interconnected. Culture Kids does not introduce a new set of goals; it offers a coordinated framework for advancing existing ones through joyful, accessible, and developmentally informed arts experiences for children aged 0-5 and their families.

Why This Moment Matters

The timing of this work is especially significant. The COVID-19 pandemic reshaped how families engage with community spaces, intensified caregiver stress, and disrupted early childhood experiences for many children. As Charlotte continues to move on from these challenges, there is a renewed opportunity to rethink how families are welcomed into public life, particularly during a child's earliest years.

Rather than relying on fragmented systems, ***this moment calls for cross-sector collaboration and preventive approaches that prioritize connection and care****. Culture Kids responds to this call by bridging arts, health, education, and community systems, transforming abstract priorities into lived experiences for families.*

Charlotte's creative ecosystem is well positioned to support this vision. The city is home to a wide range of cultural organizations, from legacy institutions to grassroots arts organizations and individual artists and creatives deeply rooted in specific communities and cultural traditions. Many have expressed readiness to collaborate rather than compete, and to reach families earlier and more equitably. Health systems, early learning providers, libraries, and neighborhood spaces offer trusted points of contact and proactive invitation that can help ensure Culture Kids is accessible, inclusive, and sustainable.

Why Charlotte, and why now, ultimately comes down to readiness and relevance. The research is clear. The need is visible. The partnerships are possible. Culture Kids represents an opportunity to align public priorities with community values, and to demonstrate how creativity can be woven into everyday life in service of children, families, and the future of Charlotte-Mecklenburg.



Photo: Charlotte SHOUT!, Charlotte Parent

OVERVIEW & METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Research & Development Phase

The Culture Kids Research and Development (R&D) phase was designed to explore how Helsinki's Culture Kids model could be thoughtfully and ambitiously adapted for Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Led by Charlotte Is Creative and supported by a research and development grant from The Gambrell Foundation, this phase centered on listening, learning, and co-creation across sectors.

The primary goals of the R&D phase were to:

- **Understand Charlotte's existing early childhood arts and cultural landscape**
- **Engage arts organizations, health leaders, community partners, and families in envisioning and shaping a Charlotte-specific Culture Kids model**
- **Identify gaps, opportunities, and barriers related to access, equity, sustainability, and implementation**
- **Build a shared foundation for an ambitious pilot that aligns with early childhood development, family well-being, and community belonging**

This phase was intentionally exploratory and iterative, prioritizing relationship-building, community input, and evidence-informed design over predetermined outcomes.

Research & Development Timeline

The R&D phase included multiple, interconnected activities designed to build understanding and alignment across stakeholders. This phased approach allowed insights from earlier conversations and data collection to inform later design sessions and pilot planning. Key milestones included:

Spring–Summer 2025: One-on-one stakeholder engagement with arts organizations, health and county leaders, libraries, and a variety of community organizations and potential partners

Summer–Early Fall 2025: Data collection for the Early Childhood Arts & Culture Asset Map

August–October 2025: Community survey of parents and caregivers conducted in partnership with UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute

November 14, 2025: Culture Kids Design Session convening cross-sector partners for values alignment and model exploration

January 9, 2026: Pilot Mapping Session focused on translating insights into a potential five-year pilot framework

Stakeholder Engagement

Stakeholder engagement was a cornerstone of the R&D phase. **Charlotte Is Creative conducted individual, in-depth conversations with a wide range of partners, including arts organizations, healthcare providers, health and human service organizations, education partners, libraries and community and culturally specific groups.** These conversations were designed to:

- Share the Helsinki Culture Kids framework
- Gather initial reactions and questions
- Understand existing programming, capacity, and constraints
- Explore how each organization might contribute to a Charlotte-based model

35+ cross-sector meetings

Stakeholders represented a broad cross-section of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's arts and community ecosystem, spanning disciplines, organizational sizes, and geographic areas.

In addition to one-on-one meetings, Charlotte Is Creative convened partners for a **Culture Kids Design Session**, bringing together arts, health, education and community leaders to explore shared values, model options, and pilot design considerations. This session emphasized Culture Kids as more than a program – positioning it as a mindset connecting creativity, wellness, and belonging from birth

A **Pilot Mapping Session** built on these conversations, shifting from ideation to early implementation thinking. Participants explored pilot scale, experience design, sustainability considerations, and early measurement questions, laying groundwork for a phased launch strategy.

Together, these engagements reflected a shared commitment to a wraparound vision for health and well-being in Charlotte – one that recognizes arts and culture as essential to supporting the whole person. This alignment across arts, health, and community partners echoes a broader "Charlotte promise": that well-being is shaped not only by medical care, but by access to joy, wonder, and meaningful cultural experiences woven into everyday life.





Community Survey Design & Implementation

To ensure that family voices directly informed program design, Charlotte Is Creative partnered with UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute to develop and administer a community survey of parents and caregivers across Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

The survey was conducted between August and October and reached 242 parents and caregivers across 39 ZIP codes, representing diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The survey explored:

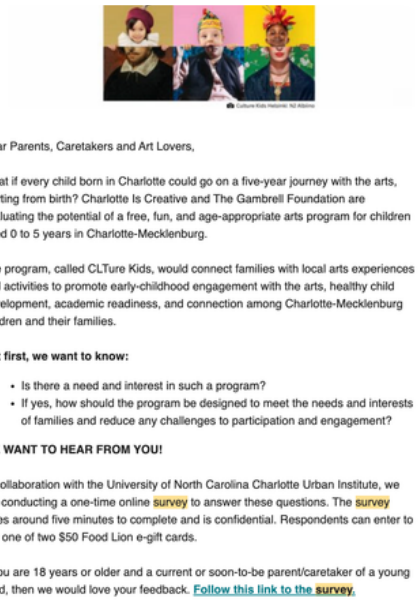
- Interest in a Culture Kids-style program
- Preferred locations, timing, and frequency
- Perceived benefits of early arts exposure
- Barriers to participation

242 survey respondents across 39 ZIP codes

Survey findings demonstrated overwhelming interest in Culture Kids and highlighted that participation barriers are largely logistical rather than attitudinal – with families prioritizing free, close-to-home experiences in trusted community spaces. Families see Culture Kids as a pathway for learning and growth, increased interest in creative activities, and belonging through community connection.

The partnership with the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute ensured methodological rigor while keeping findings accessible and actionable for evaluation during the R&D phase.





In partnership with:

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA CHARLOTTE | URBAN INSTITUTE

Early Childhood Arts & Culture Asset Mapping

In parallel with stakeholder interviews and survey work, Charlotte Is Creative conducted an asset mapping process to better understand the current landscape of early childhood arts and cultural offerings in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

Arts organizations and community partners were invited to submit information about existing programs, including age ranges served, program format, frequency, partnerships, and cost to families. While not intended to be exhaustive, the asset map provided a meaningful snapshot of 41 arts and cultural experiences offered by 18 organizations engaged during the R&D phase.

The asset map revealed both the strength of the region's arts ecosystem and clear gaps – particularly for ages 0-3, consistency over time, and coordinated entry points for families. These findings directly informed pilot design discussions and reinforced the need for a unified, longitudinal framework beginning at birth.



Methodological Considerations & Limitations

The Culture Kids R&D phase was intentionally qualitative and exploratory in nature. While the community survey provided quantitative insight into family interest and preferences, stakeholder interviews, design sessions, and asset mapping reflected the perspectives of engaged partners rather than the full arts and culture ecosystem across the county.

These methodological limitations are balanced by the depth of engagement, cross-sector participation, and strong consistency of themes that emerged across sources. The R&D process was intentionally iterative, with each phase informing the next: early stakeholder conversations shaped survey design; survey findings informed design session prompts; and insights from design and pilot mapping sessions refined assumptions related to scale, access, and implementation. Together, these methods provide a strong foundation for pilot planning, future evaluation design, and continued community engagement as Culture Kids moves from research into pilot exploration.

Throughout the R&D phase, universality was held as a core design principle – the belief that every child and family should have access to early arts experiences, regardless of circumstance. With this commitment as a starting point, the design process intentionally examined barriers related to geography, language, transportation, cost, and cultural relevance, recognizing that universality is not achieved by default but through deliberate and thoughtful design.

KEY FINDINGS FROM STAKEHOLDER CONVERSATIONS

During the initial part of the R&D phase, Charlotte Is Creative (CIC) held one-on-one meetings with arts organizations, hospital systems and health service providers, Mecklenburg County Public Health, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, and community partners such as Smart Start to introduce the Culture Kids concept and gather initial feedback. Across these conversations, partners consistently expressed support for the program's vision and recognized its potential not only to address important needs of the community, but also to spark inspiration, wonder, and a greater sense of belonging for families living in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The gut reaction we heard again and again was clear: they loved the intention behind Culture Kids and found it imperative to adapt the model to Charlotte's unique opportunities and challenges.

Arts & Culture
Arts and Science Council
Arts Empowerment Project
Arts+
Blumenthal Performing Arts Center
Carolinas Asian American Chamber of Commerce
Charlotte Ballet
Charlotte Symphony Orchestra
Children's Theatre of Charlotte
Davidson Community Players
Harvey B. Gantt Center
India Association of Charlotte
JazzArts Charlotte
La Casa de la Cultura
Matthews Playhouse of the Performing Arts
Mint Museum of Art
Music Together of Charlotte
Namaste Artists
Opera Carolina
The Bechtler Museum of Modern Art
Theatre Charlotte
Three Bone Theater
Tosco Music
We Rock CLT

Healthcare & Health Services
Atrium
Care Ring
Novant

Education & Research
CMS
UNC Charlotte Urban Institute

Early Childhood & Family Support
Reach Out and Read North Carolina
Smart Start
YMCA

Libraries & Cultural Infrastructure
Charlotte Mecklenburg Library

Philanthropy & Private Funders
PNC Bank
The Leon Levine Foundation
The Merancas Foundation

Government
Mecklenburg County

Following is a summary of key takeaways from the exploratory conversations highlighting:

1. Shared Enthusiasm & Alignment
2. Opportunities Identified
3. Barriers & Concerns

Shared Enthusiasm & Alignment

Across every conversation, partners responded with immediate enthusiasm for Culture Kids. The vision resonated both emotionally and practically – leaders expressed excitement about how it could spark belonging, reduce isolation, and fill critical gaps in access to early childhood arts.

Robin Tynes-Miller of Three Bone Theater captured the spirit of these conversations: "My first response was: I love everything about this." John Tosco of Tosco Music echoed that sentiment, calling it "a wonderful idea, a no-brainer really." Molly Phillips of the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art reflected: **"In a rapidly growing city, this is something that will unify the arts community and shows how important investment in arts and culture is to Charlotte."** Shane Agostinelli of Arts+ shared a similar reaction: **"This will put Charlotte on the map."**

Other arts leaders connected the vision to its impact on children and families. Sarah Baumgardner of Matthews Playhouse said: "This program has a lot of potential to change the landscape for young children and their families in regards to the arts." Milagros Ugueto of Casa de la Cultura added: "I consider this the best project we could have in our county, and I can't wait to see how our society and communities grow in many different ways, giving the younger generations scientifically proven mechanisms of critical thinking and exponential academic improvement."

Together, these voices underscore not only the excitement for Culture Kids but also a broad recognition of its potential. What stood out across conversations with arts leaders was their shared understanding that this program isn't just about arts access – it's about creating a framework where the arts and health sector can come together as one on behalf of Charlotte's youngest residents and their families. **As one of the fastest-growing cities in the United States – and a place widely recognized as one of the best for raising a family – Culture Kids represents an opportunity to put into practice the idea that it truly takes a village: doctors, artists, educators, and families working together to nurture future generations in a city where belonging begins with shared joy in the arts.**



It's about creating a framework where the arts and health sector can come together as one on behalf of Charlotte's youngest residents and their families.

Photo: The Bechtler Museum of Modern Art

Opportunities Identified

1. Fill gaps in early childhood programming while strengthening pipelines for families

Charlotte arts leaders consistently noted the absence of programming for the youngest children and the opportunity to build sustained relationships with families from birth. Robin Tynes-Miller of Three Bone Theater shared, "I don't think we have anybody doing the work for birth to two. This feels like a gap." Similarly, Nao Tsurumaki of Children's Theater reflected, "We've been talking internally about how to bring back our 'Play Play' program for babies – this could be a way to do it." John Tosco highlighted how his Tosco Music Party for Kids once filled this need: "Parents even brought infants. That experience showed me how important this is." And the Mint Museum observed the long-term potential: "When we do repeat programming, we build such strong relationships with families and can instill so much trust."

Taken together, these reflections point to an unmet need in Charlotte's cultural ecosystem: intentional, accessible programming that begins at birth and grows alongside families. While many arts organizations and community groups already provide plentiful programs for children and families, partners acknowledge that families are not always aware these opportunities exist, may not feel they are "for them," or face barriers that prevent access. **Culture Kids could serve as an entryway – a welcoming first touchpoint where families receive a regular dose of inspiration through joyful, low-barrier arts experiences, and then gain the confidence and awareness to explore the full range of cultural programs available across Charlotte.**

This model offers an opportunity not only to reimagine discontinued arts programs for babies like Play Play (Children's Theater) or Party for Kids (Tosco Music), through the lens of what we now know about family participation, interest, and access, but also to create a pipeline that connects families to arts organizations over time. **In turn, it positions arts organizations to expand their reach and visibility in the community, strengthening their presence while cultivating the next generation of audiences and supporters.**







"When we do repeat programming, we build such strong relationships with families and can instill so much trust." - The Mint Museum Staff

Photos: Children's Theater of Charlotte

Opportunities Identified

2. Strengthen social connection for caregivers and children

Beyond arts exposure, partners consistently emphasized the role Culture Kids could play in strengthening social connection for both children and caregivers. In a society where parenting can be isolating and stressful, the program is seen as a way to help families feel less alone. Bonita Buford of the Gantt Center captured this sentiment: *"It's not just about the kids, it's about the parents too. This is an opportunity for them to connect and realize our common humanity."*

Lal Vishin of Festival of India underscored how critical this could be for families from different backgrounds and cultures: *"Being an immigrant myself, that's one of the biggest things. In India, the network was always ready – babysitter, family, everyone... Here, suddenly, it's just you against the world. Bridging that paradigm is probably going to be the biggest challenge for this effort to succeed. We have got to keep trying. This is important. It can help parents feel they're not alone."*



These reflections align closely with national data, particularly from U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy's reports *Parents Under Pressure* and *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*. The Surgeon General notes that half of U.S. adults report experiencing loneliness, with some of the highest rates among young adults - many of whom are parents. He emphasizes that ***"supporting parents and caregivers will require a series of thoughtful policy changes and expanded community programs that will help ensure parents and caregivers can get time off to be with a sick child, secure affordable child care, access reliable mental health care, and benefit from places and initiatives that support social connection and community."*** The advisory further underscores that, *"social connection is a fundamental human need, as essential to survival as food, water, and shelter."* Culture Kids responds to this need by positioning the arts as a joyful, free, low-pressure way for parents to connect with their children, build relationships with other families, and discover a sense of belonging within their own communities.



Imagine this:

You step into your neighborhood library. You're greeted with tambourines and streamers for your infant, you stand alongside other caregivers who have children the same age as yours, and who, like you, have come for this shared experience. Suddenly, you have a community of caregivers who understand what you're going through – and ***you can all be in this together****.*

Culture Kids arts experiences have the power to spark awe, to bring people together, and to serve up a sense of connection and purpose.

Photo: The Mint Museum

Opportunities Identified

3. Healthy Brain Development and School Readiness

Our team had the privilege of sitting down with Susan Magsamen, Executive Director of the International Arts + Mind Lab Center for Applied Neuroaesthetics at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, when she came to Charlotte in March 2025 to present Music and Mind: Harnessing the Power in Community and Health at CPCC. Her research, shared in her book *Your Brain on Art*, underscores what our local partners already recognize: "**The arts engage all of our senses and light up multiple parts of the brain. They create new neural pathways, strengthen existing ones, and build the capacity to learn and adapt."** As she explains, **"From the time babies are born, their brains are being shaped by aesthetic experiences – lullabies, playful games, colorful books, and the rhythms of spoken language. These encounters are literally wiring the brain for future learning."**

> *"Creativity and play are not luxuries. They are biologically designed to advance brain growth, social skills, and problem-solving from our earliest years." - Susan Magsamen*

Charlotte is already putting this research into practice. The Bechtler Museum works directly with Meck Pre-K classrooms across the county, bringing visual arts into early learning environments to support creativity and cognitive development. The Charlotte Symphony has partnered with Charlotte Bilingual Preschool to integrate music into early learning. Arts+ runs literacy-based preschool arts classes that intentionally link creative expression to early reading. And through Smart Start's Imagination Library, children birth to age five receive free monthly books at home, with the goal "to ensure that families are fully equipped with the appropriate developmental tools and resources needed to promote the importance of early literacy."

Together, these efforts point to a powerful ecosystem already at work in Charlotte – one that recognizes that the arts are not simply enrichment, but essential to healthy brain development and academic readiness. Culture Kids builds on this foundation by growing awareness among caregivers that the arts – while sparking imagination and curiosity – are simultaneously a critical ingredient for cognitive growth, school readiness, and lifelong learning.

Early childhood experts consistently emphasized the importance of positive, relational experiences – especially between caregiver and child – in shaping long-term health and well-being. Anna Brothers of Reach Out and Read Charlotte highlighted that **while Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) can have lasting impacts on health and development, Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) – such as shared, joyful activities between a child and caregiver can mitigate these effects.** Programs like Culture Kids intentionally create PCEs by pairing arts experiences with caregiver engagement, supporting healthy brain development while fostering emotional connection, regulation, and resilience during the most formative years of life.



Photo: The Mint Museum

Opportunities Identified

4. Foster Unprecedented Collaboration Within the Creative Sector and Across Sectors

A defining opportunity partners saw in Culture Kids is its ability to foster collaboration rather than competition within Charlotte's creative ecosystem. As Andie Maloney of Blumenthal Arts put it: "I'm excited for the impact of early arts access on child development and family relationships along with community building and collaboration, between many stakeholders, but uniquely within the arts and culture sector." Inspired by Helsinki's model, Culture Kids is rooted in co-creation – working with arts organizations to establish core values and design a program that reflects Charlotte's unique challenges and barriers, shaped by partner and community feedback. **This process also taps into the rich tapestry of Charlotte's arts ecosystem – from legacy institutions to grassroots organizations to individual creatives – ensuring the program draws on a wide spectrum of voices and provides diverse, culturally relevant creative experiences for families.**

That spirit of collaboration also extends beyond the arts. In our meeting with Mecklenburg County Public Health, Dr. Raynard Washington emphasized the important role of health providers in engaging families from the very beginning, noting that "pediatric visits are the strongest touchpoint for reaching babies in their earliest months." Charlotte Is Creative is already collaborating with both of the region's major health systems in ways that illustrate the intersection of art and health. With Novant Health, CIC is leading the Art of Remarkable Care initiative, a $500,000 investment in Charlotte's creative community. **As Dr. Sid Fletcher, SVP, President Charlotte Region, Novant Health explained, "Our goal is to create a healthier future for Charlotte, and we recognize that well-being requires more than traditional medicine."** At the same time, Atrium Health has partnered with CIC to source artists for installations across its facilities, including the new Pearl Innovation District, reinforcing its commitment to embedding creativity into their spaces.

*Together, these efforts show that **Charlotte's healthcare systems view the arts as integral to community well-being**. Both Atrium and Novant teams expressed enthusiasm and openness to exploring how regular pediatric and maternal health visits could become a natural entry point for families to connect with the Culture Kids program.*

Partners also highlighted the potential for collaboration with child care centers, schools, libraries, and public spaces – trusted and accessible community spaces where Culture Kids activities could take place. These venues were seen as powerful ways to grow access, reduce barriers, and create regular, joyful experiences for young children and their families close to home.

The success of Culture Kids depends on collaboration – across the arts, health, education, and community sectors – working together in ways that Charlotte has not yet seen at this scale. Each partner brings unique strengths, but it is only through shared effort that the program can reach every family and reflect the city's diversity. At its heart, Culture Kids is about much more than access to the arts; it is about fostering belonging. Belonging gives families connection to their communities and helps them feel integral to where they live. By weaving creativity into everyday life, Culture Kids can create the conditions where Charlotte's youngest residents – and their caregivers – develop a sense of purpose and feel truly connected to their community.

Barriers & Concerns

1. Operational Capacity

Arts organizations flagged the need for administrative support and financial resources to participate effectively. Without this, there is concern that the program could stretch already limited staff capacity or compete with mission-driven programming. **Partners also agreed that adequate funding would allow organizations to not only cover their internal costs but also collaborate within the creative sector to train and bring on local artists who could serve as arts providers – ensuring a larger pool of skilled facilitators equipped to deliver high-quality, developmentally appropriate experiences.** On the meeting follow-up questionnaire, most organizations indicated that funding to cover program related costs would help their organization say "yes" to participating.

2. Programming



In Helsinki, the Culture Kids model assigns one cultural organization to walk with a child from birth until school age. The rationale was to "maximize familiarity" and essentially build a trusting relationship between the family and arts organization. In Charlotte, however, partners saw both pros and cons to this approach. Although many saw the benefit for their own organization to build deep and long-lasting relationships with families, most felt that local families would likely prefer a diverse palette of creative experiences to choose from rather than being connected with just one organization over five years. Families in Charlotte will likely be interested in children having exposure to multiple art forms and cultural perspectives. This feedback echoes findings from the Culture Kids Community Survey conducted this fall in partnership with UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute, where families expressed strong interest in diverse, culturally relevant arts experiences for their children – a key insight shaping program design.

A second, critical theme was cultural relevance. Partners cautioned that program design must not default to Eurocentric offerings and should instead reflect Charlotte's cultural diversity. This creates an opportunity to expand on existing relationships that many arts organizations already have with culturally specific groups and to grow the intentionality behind these partnerships. Providing culturally diverse programming not only makes Culture Kids more inclusive but also enhances one of its core values: belonging. In the meeting follow-up questionnaire, Lal Vishin of Festival of India emphasized this point when asked about concerns for the program, noting the importance of "access to art resources for the complex diversity of the community." His reflection highlights that **equitable design must engage culturally diverse arts and culture organizations to ensure programming is relevant and truly reflective of Charlotte's families – a reminder that belonging is built when diverse communities see their traditions and values reflected in shared experiences.**

Photo: TrèSoho Studios, Camp North End, Rumbao Latin Dance Co.

Finally, both arts organizations and health partners emphasized the importance of training providers in best practices for early childhood experiences. Programming for ages 0-1 looks very different from programming for ages 1-2 or 3-5, and success will depend on organizations being equipped with the right tools and training to design developmentally appropriate, engaging activities. **To build this capacity, Culture Kids should lean on early childhood arts educators for guidance and schedule training sessions before launch – ensuring providers are trusted, prepared, and aligned with developmental milestones.** There are opportunities to consult with existing programs like Kindermusik, We Rock Charlotte's BabyPUNK, and Music Together Charlotte, all of which specialize in arts experiences for ages 0–5. Doing so not only strengthens Culture Kids but also creates pathways for families to discover and engage with existing local programs.

3. Transportation & Logistics

Transportation was the single most common concern raised in the meeting follow-up questionnaire – cited by nearly every responding organization as a barrier for families to participate in Culture Kids. Partners stressed that many families struggle to reach Uptown venues, and that programming must be distributed geographically across neighborhoods in order to be truly accessible. Scheduling was also a frequent concern, with several partners noting the importance of evenings and weekends to accommodate working caregivers, as well as child care for siblings who might otherwise limit parents' ability to attend.

Taken together, these responses reinforce that accessibility must be built into the program design from the beginning. **Locating activities in trusted community hubs like libraries and community centers – and ensuring flexible, family-friendly scheduling – will be essential to making Culture Kids a universal program that works for all families.** Findings from the Culture Kids Community Survey conducted in partnership with UNC Charlotte's Urban Institute further support this, capturing parents' perspectives on barriers like transportation, scheduling, and child care that must be addressed for families to fully participate.



Photo: Charlotte Symphony Orchestra Roadshow

Barriers & Concerns

4. Equity & Access

The aspiration is for Culture Kids to be a universal program for every child in Mecklenburg County, but partners consistently stressed that universality must come with equity – ensuring that the most vulnerable families are not left behind. Without intentional design, Culture Kids could primarily serve families who are already engaged with the arts or who face fewer barriers to participation. Dr. Raynard Washington, Mecklenburg County Public Health Director, underscored that Culture Kids must reflect the diversity of Charlotte and ensure that those who stand to benefit the most are not left out. He suggested piloting the program not just on convenience or partner readiness, but on reaching communities with the greatest need as this would demonstrate the program's impact while also building a foundation for equity.



Across conversations and survey responses, partners noted that access for low-income families, immigrant and transient communities, and families with children experiencing developmental delays must be intentionally built into the program. They stressed that barriers such as transportation, neighborhood access, and parent involvement could easily limit participation if not addressed. Dr. Washington emphasized **the importance of "meeting families where they are" – embedding Culture Kids in places families already frequent, such as Pre-K sign-ups, school drives, and faith-based communities.**

The fact that partners and key stakeholders are already flagging equity and access as central considerations at this early stage is both encouraging and essential. It signals that those closest to the work recognize the risks and want to help shape solutions before the program is even designed. **Partners also stressed that addressing these issues is key to the sustainability of Culture Kids – ensuring it is not a "one-off" initiative, but a program that can be supported, funded, and grown over time.** Elevating equity and sustainability as design priorities highlights a shared commitment to co-creation, ensuring that Culture Kids is not only built for Charlotte's families, but in partnership with them.

Photo: The Mint Museum

EARLY CHILDHOOD ARTS & CULTURE ASSET MAP

Understanding the Landscape in Charlotte-Mecklenburg: A Diverse and Rich Arts Ecosystem

As part of the Culture Kids Research and Development phase, Charlotte Is Creative conducted an asset mapping process to better understand the current landscape of arts and cultural experiences available to young children and families across Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The purpose of this effort was not to create an exhaustive inventory of all arts activity in the county, but rather to capture a meaningful snapshot of existing offerings among organizations engaged during the R&D phase and to identify patterns, strengths, and gaps relevant to early childhood arts access.

The asset map reflects input from 18 arts and community organizations, representing a wide range of artistic disciplines including music, movement and dance, visual and tactile arts, storytelling and theater, and multidisciplinary programming. **Participating organizations include major cultural institutions, mid-sized and grassroots arts organizations, libraries, and culturally specific groups serving diverse communities across Charlotte-Mecklenburg.** Many offerings emphasize creativity, sensory engagement, and participatory learning – approaches that align closely with best practices in early childhood development. Together, these organizations provide arts experiences that contribute significantly to the cultural life and vibrancy of the region.

WHO PARTICIPATED:
18 Arts & Culture Organizations | 41 Programs
This is not exhaustive of all arts and culture activity in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. It reflects only the organizations interviewed during the Culture Kids Research & Development phase. *See full list of participants on page 59.*

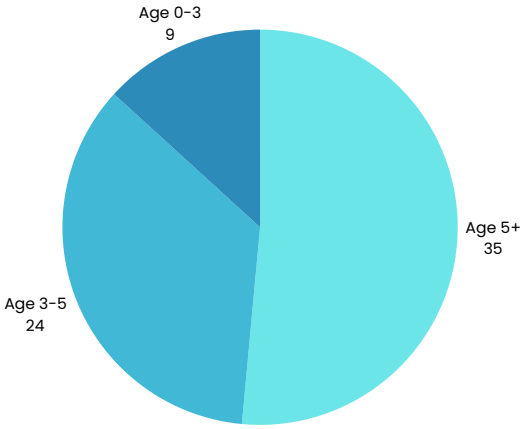
A Gap in Arts for Ages 0-3

Across the 41 arts and cultural experiences submitted through the asset mapping process, many organizations reported offering programs designed for children and families, often as part of broader community engagement or multi-age family programming. These programs take place in a variety of settings, including arts organization facilities, schools and pre-k environments, community centers, churches, libraries, and outdoor spaces. While many offerings are family-friendly and welcoming to young children, programming is most commonly concentrated in the preschool years, with fewer offerings tailored specifically for infants and toddlers.

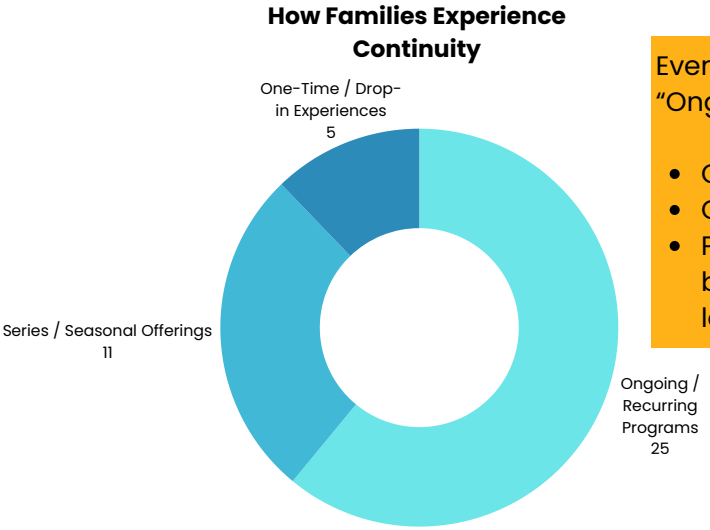
While many arts organizations offer family-friendly programming, the asset map reveals a significant drop-off in offerings intentionally designed for infants and toddlers (ages 0-3).

Only 9 of 41 identified programs intentionally include children ages 0-3**, while most programs begin serving children at preschool age or later, **leaving a critical gap during the earliest years of development.

Age Ranges Served:
(Programs may serve multiple age ranges)



Additionally, the frequency and structure of existing programs vary widely. Many experiences are offered as one-time events, short-term series, or seasonal programs. **While these offerings provide valuable exposure to the arts, they often lack the consistency and predictability that support habit formation, sustained engagement, and long-term developmental impact for young children and their caregivers**. Although many programs are described as ongoing, closer examination reveals that a significant portion are offered as seasonal workshops, camps, or limited series. **From a family perspective, this can result in arts engagement occurring in bursts rather than as a consistent part of early childhood routines.**



Even though 25 programs are labeled "Ongoing / Recurring", many of these are:

- Camps
- Classes offered by season or session
- Programs that repeat monthly or annually but do not follow the same families longitudinally

Programs were categorized based on schedule information reported by participating organizations.

Access and Sustainability Considerations

More than half of the arts and cultural experiences identified in the asset map – 22 of 41 programs – are offered free to participants, removing cost as a barrier for families. **Free access is especially important in early childhood, allowing families to explore a range of experiences and discover their child's interests without a significant financial burden.** Many of these programs are made possible through grants, sponsorships, public funding, or organizational resources, which can fluctuate from year to year. As a result, families may find that a program they valued one year is no longer available the next. **Culture Kids responds to this challenge by offering a model that is free, independent of family income, and designed to encourage sustained participation – ensuring that cost does not limit access or continuity during a child's earliest years.**

Who Carries the Financial Burden
22 of 41 programs are free to families
Free to families ≠ free to deliver.

Access to existing programs is typically made possible by the following sources, which can be unpredictable:

- Grants
- Sponsorships
- Public funding
- Organizational resources

Taken together, the cost data shines a light on program sustainability – making visible the often-unseen labor and financial risk carried by arts organizations and positioning Culture Kids as a stabilizing investment in early childhood and family well-being through the arts.

Location and transportation emerged as additional factors shaping access. While arts organizations offer high-quality programming, many experiences are hosted in venues that may be unfamiliar or difficult to reach for families with infants and toddlers. **Community-based locations – such as libraries and neighborhood spaces – were consistently identified as trusted, convenient and accessible entry points for families with young children.**

Finally, while caregiver participation is often assumed or encouraged in early childhood programming, it is not always intentionally designed, supported, or measured as a core outcome. This presents an opportunity to more explicitly center caregiver-child interaction as a key component of Culture Kids.

What the Asset Map Reveals for Culture Kids

In addition to mapping programs, the asset map reflects a strong spirit of collaboration across Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Arts organizations partner with schools, libraries, health and early childhood partners and community-based groups – demonstrating a shared interest in working across sectors to support families and young children. This appetite for collaboration is essential to the Culture Kids model, which relies on coordinated partnerships rather than isolated programs to create meaningful, lasting impact.



The asset map underscores both the opportunity – and the need – for a program like Culture Kids in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. While the region benefits from a vibrant and diverse arts ecosystem offering meaningful experiences for children and families, these opportunities are often fragmented, unevenly distributed, and not intentionally coordinated across the critical early years of child development.

Conversations with early childhood leaders reinforced what the asset map reveals: with approximately **80% of brain development occurring by age three, the earliest years represent a critical window for positive, caregiver-child experiences – underscoring the urgency of reaching families earlier.**

Culture Kids responds directly to these challenges by offering a predictable, longitudinal pathway of arts engagement beginning at birth and continuing through age five, with a clear pipeline into preschool and school-age arts participation. Rather than replacing existing programs, Culture Kids connects arts organizations through a shared framework that supports consistency, accessibility, and alignment with early childhood development and family well-being.

Most notably, the asset map reveals a community rich in arts opportunities, but one that families often encounter in fragments rather than as a journey.

Families currently navigate multiple organizations, schedules, locations, and registration systems – often discovering opportunities later, when children reach school age. **Culture Kids bridges this gap** by creating a clear, welcoming pathway into the arts from the earliest years – strengthening access, continuity, and connection for families across Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

Before and After: What Culture Kids Enables

Current Landscape:	Culture Kids Pilot Model:
Costs vary by program	**No cost to families**
Families must search for opportunities	**Families invited through trusted partners**
Funding varies by organization	**Coordinated, stabilized support**
Engagement is episodic / seasonal	**Predictable, five-year pathway**
Organizations operate independently	**Organizations connected through a shared framework**

CULTURE KIDS COMMUNITY SURVEY

Prepared by the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute
Authors: Mecca Howe, PhD and Kadae Phimia

URBAN INSTITUTE
REGIONAL DATA TRUST

The UNC Charlotte Urban Institute is our region's applied research and community outreach center. We seek solutions to the complex social, economic and environmental challenges facing our communities. We engage expertise across a diverse set of disciplines and life experiences to curate data, conducting actionable research and policy analysis that helps us make better decisions that benefit all of us.

What Did We Do?

The UNC Charlotte Urban Institute developed a short survey for current and expecting parents and caregivers of children up to five years of age. The survey measured families' interests in the potential Culture Kids program, preferences, and barriers to participation.

More specifically, the research questions guiding the survey included:

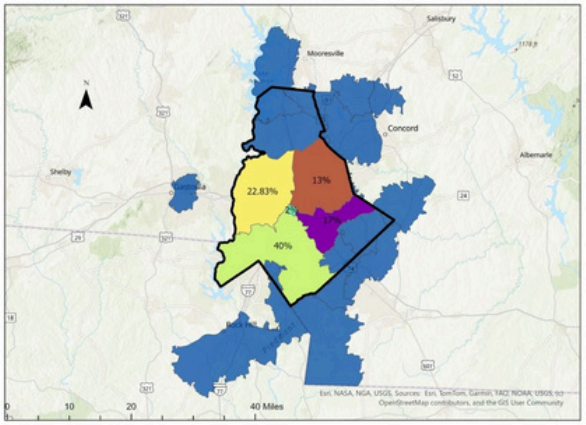
- Is there a need and/or interest among parents and caregivers in Charlotte-Mecklenburg for the Culture Kids program?
- What barriers would prevent parents and caregivers from participating in the Culture Kids program?
- What factors would facilitate participation in Culture Kids?

The survey was conducted over the course of two months, from September to October 2025. Flyers linking to the online survey were shared with community members through Charlotte Is Creative partners, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Libraries, childcare centers, community recreation centers and social media posts.

Who We Heard From:

A total of 242 parents and caregivers across 39 zip codes participated in the survey (Figure 1). To better understand geographic distribution, zip codes were categorized by direction and proximity to central Charlotte, with South (21.74%), Far West (18.48%), and East Charlotte (17.39%) having the largest representation. The majority of the respondents identified as White/Caucasian (60%) followed by Black or African American (25%)(See Table 1). As Table 1 displays, race and ethnicity were not evenly distributed across the sample regions.

Survey Representation by City Region (Charlotte)



Mecklenburg County boundary
Charlotte regions
Central
East
North
South
West
Zip codes represented in the survey

Table 1. Race and Ethnicity of Parents/Caregivers Across Charlotte Regions

	Total Sample	Region					
		North	East	Central	South	West	Outside
Race/Ethnicity							
Asian	9%	2%	6%	0%	7%	4%	29%
Black/African American	25%	44%	22%	0%	4%	44%	29%
Hispanic/Latinx	13%	17%	6%	25%	12%	20%	7%
White/Caucasian	60%	37%	63%	75%	72%	28%	29%
Other	2%	0%	3%	0%	3%	0%	0%
Prefer not to answer	4%	0%	0%	0%	2%	4%	7%
Total Sample	100%	13%	17%	2%	37%	23%	8%

Note: Race/ethnicity is calculated if the individual selected the option, despite whether they selected other race/ethnicity categories. Thus, the distribution for each category includes individuals with multiple races or ethnicities, totaling more than 100%
Other = Native American, Middle Eastern, and "other"; Outside = outside of Mecklenburg County

Nearly all (98%) respondents said they were interested in the proposed Culture Kids Program

What Matters Most

> ***"To have access to activities that would usually be unaffordable."***

Parents and caregivers were most interested in a program that provides an opportunity to introduce their children to new activities (88%) hosted close to home (68%), and that is free (67%) and reflects the different cultures and communities in Charlotte (67%).

The analysis revealed an association between parental values and race/ethnicity. Black respondents placed a greater importance on offerings being free compared to White respondents. Hispanic/Latinx respondents were 26 times more likely, and Black respondents were four times more likely, to place value on having a program offered in multiple languages.

When asked what they hope their child gains from participating in the program, respondents were most hopeful that their child would learn and grow, develop an interest in art and creative activities, and interact with other children with diverse cultural backgrounds.

> *"We are not alone in this world. With [diversity, equity, and inclusion] programs being eliminated, it is more important to make sure our children have experiences with other children, families to learn that we have a great world to thrive in."*

Associations between responses and race/ethnicity found that Black respondents were two times more likely to value the opportunity to meet other children from across Mecklenburg County than White respondents. Black and Hispanic/Latinx respondents were three and four times more likely to select "better prepared for kindergarten" as a potential benefit compared to White respondents.

There was also an association between child values and location, with North and East Charlotte respondents more likely to value interaction with other children in their age group compared to South Charlotte residents. Thus, respondents from historically lower-income areas of Charlotte particularly value the opportunity for socialization and connection with other children and communities.

What Gets In the Way

The most common barriers to participation identified by respondents included **busy schedules (67%), distance to program location (59%) and transportation or parking (24.5%).** Respondents identifying as White and living in South Charlotte (the predominantly higher-income/resource area of the city) were more likely to select busy schedules, while those identifying as Asian and more than one race were more likely to indicate transportation, parking and distance as barriers to participation.

"8-5 weekdays will exclude children with working parents like myself. Traffic - I have transportation but traffic will prevent me from going places. I don't want to drive 10 miles if those 10 miles will take me an hour. Program should consider appropriate locations for communities that are on roads with high traffic."

When and Where Families Want to Participate

The most preferred locations to attend activities and events included libraries (95%), local parks (76%) and museums/theaters (68%). However, significantly more respondents living in North, East and West (75%-86%) Charlotte also selected recreation and youth centers as desirable locations compared to respondents from Central and South Charlotte. The most common "other" recommendation for location was local art venues and spaces (e.g., art studios/co-ops, The Long Room, The VAPA Center).

Respondents also want program activities to take place during weekends, with **Saturday mornings most favored (67%), followed by Saturday and Sunday afternoons (58% and 60%, respectively).**

"The timing and commitment level [must] suit my family's schedule, taking into account work/daycare and naptimes."
"Any evening activity will likely be challenging for people with kids under 2 or so. Between bedtime and dinner, we're settled at home for the night by 5!"

Conclusion: What We Learned from Charlotte Families

Charlotte families want early arts experiences for their children that introduce them to new hobbies and creative activities that "encourage curiosity and imagination," that will help their children grow in healthy ways, and foster connections with other children, cultures, and communities. Logistical preferences include activities that are free, easy to get to, and take place on the weekends. These values are most evident among non-White parents and caregivers and those residing in North and East Charlotte.

SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE FOR EARLY ARTS ENGAGEMENT

Author: Susan Magsamen
Executive Director, International Arts + Mind Lab
Center for Applied Neuroaesthetics, Co-Director
NeuroArts Blueprint Initiative
(December 2025)



Arts & Healthy Brain Development
Research across neuroscience, education, psychology, and public health increasingly demonstrates that early engagement with the arts is not just enrichment, it is integral to healthy brain development, cognitive growth, social-emotional learning, identity formation, and overall well-being. These benefits span from infancy through early childhood and into school readiness, making programs like Culture Kids in Helsinki powerful models for nurturing children and families through structured access to creative experiences.

Arts Engagement and Neurodevelopment
The first years of life are a critical window for brain development, during which neural connections are formed rapidly in response to rich sensory, social, and learning experiences. Research on the role of arts engagement in early development suggests that the arts support both neural and cognitive growth by engaging multiple brain systems concurrently, from sensory processing to motor coordination, memory formation, and emotional regulation. A scoping review by the World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that arts engagement, including music, dance, drama, and visual arts, is linked to improved attention, prosocial behavior, creativity, and emotional competence in children and adolescents, all of which are part of healthy neurodevelopment (WHO Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report, 2025).

"A scoping review by the World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that arts engagement, including music, dance, drama, and visual arts, is linked to improved attention, prosocial behavior, creativity, and emotional competence in children and adolescents, all of which are part of healthy neurodevelopment."

Executive Function, Impulse Control, and Focus
Executive function skills including impulse control, attentional flexibility, goal-directed behavior, and working memory are essential predictors of school success, social competence, and emotional resilience. Activities intentionally designed to strengthen executive function in early childhood contribute to improved relationships, emotional well-being, and readiness for formal schooling (Community Playthings, n.d.). Although the foundational research on arts directly improving executive function is still emerging, interventions combining arts and cultural experiences show promising results. For instance, the Art of Learning intervention, an arts-rich program for school-age children, demonstrated measurable improvements in executive function and behavioral regulation after participation (Brock et al., 2019).

Moreover, WHO's broader arts and health review notes that arts activities facilitate creation, attention, and prosocial behaviors and are associated with autonomy and competence, critical components of self-regulation, a key part of executive function (WHO Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report, 2025).

Photo: The Arts + Mind Lab

Social-Emotional Learning, Well-Being, and Identity

The arts are powerful platforms for social-emotional learning (SEL), the set of competencies that include self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The National Endowment for the Arts reports that arts education can help children better cope with feelings, bounce back from adversity, and show tolerance and compassion for others (*NEA Arts and Health, n.d.*).

WHO's research also underscores that arts engagement contributes to emotional well-being and social connection, which supports resilience and psychological adjustment across the lifespan (WHO Arts and Health, 2025). A rapid review of arts activities showed positive effects on self-confidence, self-esteem, relationship building, and a sense of belonging, qualities associated with resilience and mental well-being in children and young people (Young et al., 2017).

In addition to these social and affective outcomes, the arts play a transformative role in identity formation and agency. Artistic expression allows children to explore, reflect on, and communicate their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds, fostering a sense of self that is grounded in meaningful engagement. When children participate in creative activities, they exercise personal choice, voice, and autonomy — core dimensions of agency that contribute to self-confidence and motivation to engage in future learning.

"The National Endowment for the Arts reports that arts education can help children better cope with feelings, bounce back from adversity, and show tolerance and compassion for others."

Academic Readiness and Lifelong Benefits

By strengthening executive functions, attention, memory, and social-emotional competencies, arts engagement is tightly linked to school readiness and academic achievement. Children who develop strong self-regulation and social skills transition more smoothly into formal schooling and perform better in academic tasks requiring sustained attention, flexible thinking, and motivated engagement. Arts experiences that integrate creativity, reflection, and cognitive challenge align strongly with these developmental outcomes (National Academies of Sciences, 2023).

Beyond early childhood, abundant research shows participation in the arts supports mental health, stress reduction, and overall well-being across the lifespan. WHO's synthesis of global evidence on arts and health describes how engagement in arts not only enriches quality of life but can also support preventive health and psychological resilience, helping individuals manage emotions and life challenges. (*WHO Arts and Health, 2025*).

"By strengthening executive functions, attention, memory, and social-emotional competencies, arts engagement is tightly linked to school readiness and academic achievement."

Culture Kids: A Model for Arts-Informed Development

The Culture Kids program in Helsinki offers a compelling real-world application of these research insights. Culture Kids pairs every child born in Helsinki in or after 2020 with a cultural sponsor, an arts or cultural institution that invites the child and family to at least two age-appropriate cultural events per year until the child enters primary school (City of Helsinki, Culture Kids). These events are curated to support developmental stages and promote the well-being of both children and their families.

More than 30 arts and cultural organizations participate as sponsors, ensuring free, tailored artistic experiences that span dance, circus, visual art, theater, music, museums, and cultural storytelling (City of Helsinki Culture Kids Sponsors). Annual engagement rates indicate thousands of families are involved, with diverse events designed to reach families from numerous cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Culture Kids Program Reaches Thousands).

Culture Kids emphasizes family participation, recognizing that shared arts experiences deepen social bonds, support emotional well-being, and model lifelong learning habits. The program's scale and inclusivity, reaching families across Helsinki regardless of socioeconomic status, positions it as both an equity-oriented cultural policy and a developmentally informed public health initiative, with explicit goals of reinforcing children's agency, cultural identity, and sense of belonging.

The evidence is clear: Early and sustained arts engagement supports healthy brain development by enhancing executive function, impulse control, memory, attention, socio-emotional competence, creativity, identity formation, and overall well-being. This convergence of research from neuroscience, developmental psychology, education, and public health makes a strong case for programs like Helsinki's Culture Kids, which embed arts and aesthetics into children's lives from birth. By grounding cultural access in developmental science, such programs help build not only about creative expression and appreciation, but healthy brains, adaptive behaviors, emotional resilience, personal agency, and empowered young citizens ready to thrive in school, relationships, and life.







"The evidence is clear. Early and sustained arts engagement supports healthy brain development by enhancing executive function, impulse control, memory, attention, socio-emotional competence, creativity, identity formation, and overall well-being."

Photo: Culture Kids Experiences, Helsinki - Petri Anttila (L), Ilkka Saastamoinen (Top R), Matti Snellman (Bottom R)

RECOMMENDED PILOT FRAMEWORK, TIMELINE AND BUDGET

From Research to Pilot Design

The Culture Kids Charlotte pilot model is the result of a multi-stage, collaborative design process conducted during the Research and Development phase. This process centered the voices of arts organizations, health and community partners, early childhood experts, and families, with the goal of translating shared values and community priorities into a testable, locally responsive pilot model.

Two key convenings shaped the pilot recommendation: the Culture Kids Design Session (November 14, 2025) and the Pilot Mapping Session (January 9, 2026). Together, these sessions moved the work from vision and values into operational clarity – testing assumptions, identifying challenges, and refining a model that balances ambition with feasibility.

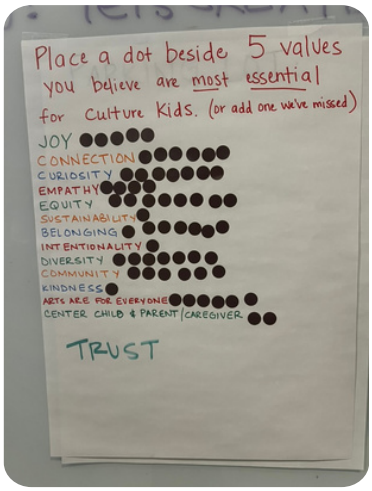
Design Session: Establishing Shared Values and Priorities

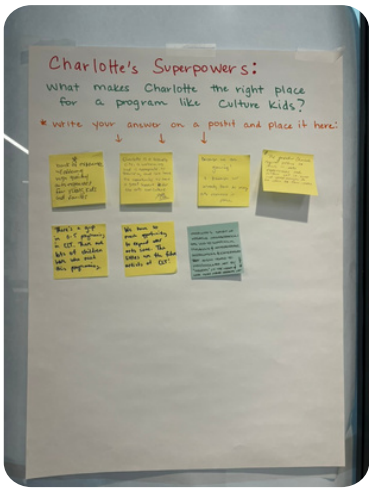
The November Design Session convened cross-sector stakeholders to align on the core values, goals, and design principles that should guide Culture Kids in Charlotte. **Participants were asked to identify the values most essential to the program and to reflect on what distinguishes Charlotte as a place to pilot a bold initiative like Culture Kids.**

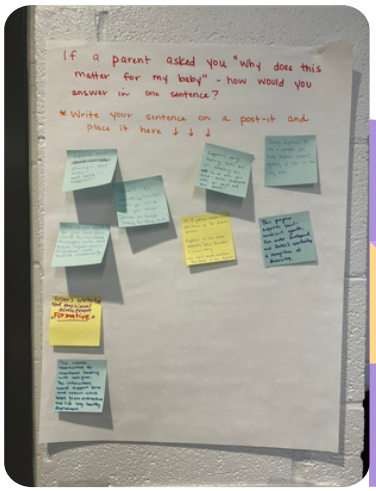
Across responses, several themes emerged consistently:

- **Universality and equity** as non-negotiable principles
- Core Values: **Arts are for everyone, Connection, Belonging, Equity, Diversity, Health & well-being, Joy**
- **Consistency and predictability** as essential for early childhood development
- **Early exposure to the arts** as foundational to brain development, family bonding, and long-term well-being

Participants also emphasized that Culture Kids should not function as a stand-alone arts program, but rather as a wraparound approach to child and family well-being, integrating joy, creativity, and community connection alongside health and social supports. These findings established the conceptual framework that guided all subsequent pilot design decisions.







Pilot Mapping Session: Translating Values & Community Preferences into a Testable Model

The January Pilot Mapping Session brought together key arts organizations to collaboratively design a pilot model that could be clearly articulated, budgeted, and evaluated. Building on the values and priorities identified in November, participants worked through a series of structured questions related to cadence, location, scale, invitation pathways, staffing, and experience design.

Key insights from this session included:

- Strong consensus around a **monthly cadence**, ideally on a consistent Saturday, to support habit-building and ease for families
- Clear preference for **libraries and community spaces** as trusted, accessible anchor locations for families with children ages 0–5
- Recognition that **consistency in place and relationships is critical in the earliest years**, with more flexibility and **choice introduced as children grow**
- Broad support for **positioning Culture Kids as a whole-child and family wellness touchpoint**, distinct from traditional arts programming

These insights directly informed the recommended pilot structure outlined below.

Pilot Concept and Target Population

The recommended pilot is a five-year, cohort-based program that follows one group of children from birth through age five. The pilot is intentionally cohort-based as a learning phase, serving approximately 600 families spanning Mecklenburg County. **Universality is a key element of the Culture Kids concept and impact, and this pilot, while limited in size, will be structured to capture the essence of universality while testing participation, logistics, experience design, and measurement before considering broader implementation.**

Each participating family would include one child and one primary caregiver, recognizing the central role of caregiver-child interaction in early development.



5-year pilot

Serving 600 families

Children from 0-5 years

Photo: Charlotte Symphony Orchestra

Family Invitation and Enrollment

One of the most critical design elements of the Culture Kids pilot is how families first learn about and are invited to participate. **Rather than relying on traditional marketing or self-discovery the pilot intentionally embeds invitations with systems and spaces families already trust and use regularly.**

Invitation pathways:

- **Healthcare touchpoints: maternity and prenatal care visits, well-child pediatric visits, mobile health clinics and community health centers**
- **Libraries**
- **Community & recreation facilities**
- **Early childhood programs and daycares**
- **Places of worship and faith-based groups**
- **Meck-Pre-K registration events**
- **Smart Start events and services**
- **Community festivals**

A digital platform will be developed to drive and track enrollment, coordinate ongoing event registrations for families, and gather feedback. This data platform will recognize what the Community Survey revealed: parents are busy and need simple, streamlined access.



Program Structure and Cadence

- Monthly "Culture Kids Saturdays", offering a **consistent time, place, and format**
- Each session framed as a "Culture Kids Hour", featuring shared rituals such as:
  - A **welcome song** or anthem
  - A **caregiver-child engagement moment**
  - A **passport stamp** or sticker to mark the child's journey
- Each arts provider curates a **30 minute, age-appropriate artistic experience**, repeated across three one-hour sessions at each site (e.g., 9-10am, 10-11am, 11am-12pm)
- The remaining 30 minutes give families an **opportunity to connect over snacks and shared resources or touchpoints with health and community partners**

This structure prioritizes predictability for families while allowing arts providers to design high-quality, developmentally appropriate experiences.

Photo: The Bechtler Museum of Modern Art

Pilot Locations

Research on social mobility, including findings from Raj Chetty (William A. Ackman Professor of Economics at Harvard University and the Director of Opportunity Insights), suggests that shared, positive experiences among families from different socioeconomic backgrounds can strengthen social connection and contribute to greater long-term opportunity. Libraries and trusted community spaces naturally draw families across neighborhoods and income levels, and offer a powerful setting for this kind of cross-community interaction, supporting both individual well-being and a more connected civic fabric.

Consistent with this research, libraries and community spaces emerged as preferred and trusted primary locations for families through the Community Survey conducted by UNC Charlotte Urban Institute.

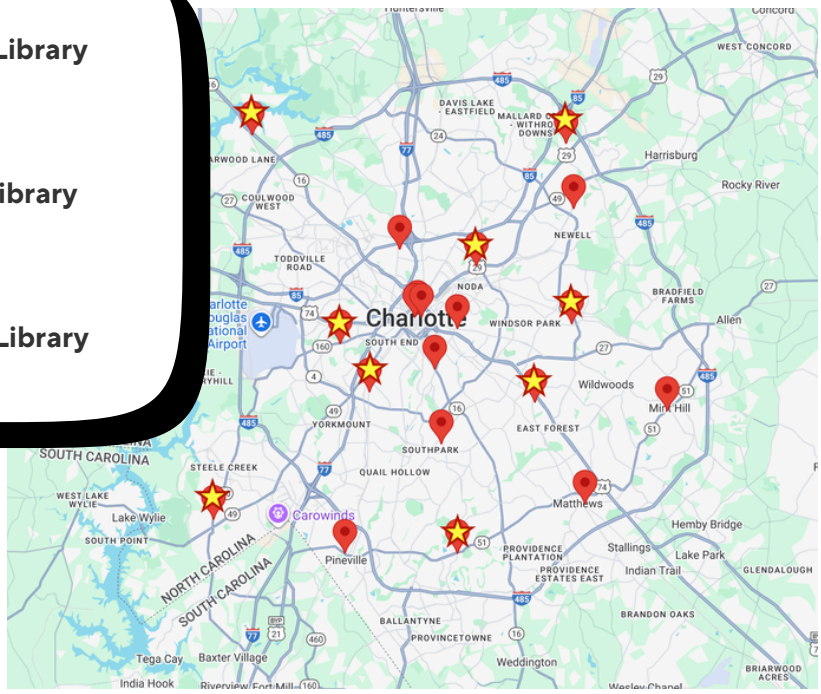
The pilot model recommends partnering with approximately 6 library branches and 6 additional community spaces, selected based on:

- **physical appropriateness for ages 0-5**
- **accessibility and familiarity for families**
- **geographic and socioeconomic diversity**

Each participating library or community space would serve as a neighborhood anchor, hosting Culture Kids sessions and supporting continuity throughout the pilot period. A designated Culture Kids Ambassador at each pilot location would welcome families, foster relationship-building, coordinate with arts providers, and, when possible, **host parallel programming such as sibling storytime to further support whole-family participation**.

Location Recommendations by Partners at Charlotte Mecklenburg Library
Approximately 6 pilot locations would be selected from this list.

- **Hickory Grove Library**
- **Independence Regional Library**
- **Mountain Island Library**
- **South Blvd. Library**
- **South County Regional Library**
- **Steele Creek Library**
- **Sugar Creek Library**
- **University City Regional Library**
- **West Blvd. Library**



Five-Year Pathway for Families

The pilot model proposes a phased experience for families:

Years 1-2: Families attend Culture Kids exclusively at their home library or community space, building trust, routine, and habit-building





Years 3-5: Families may choose to follow an arts provider to other locations based on a child's emerging interests, allowing Culture Kids to act as a bridge into the broader arts ecosystem

Families would also receive age-based resource guides to support deeper engagement beyond the pilot sessions.



Arts Providers and Experience Design

- Participating providers receive training in:
  - Early childhood development (ages 0–5)
  - Caregiver engagement
  - The shared Culture Kids framework and values
- 6-12 lead **arts organizations rotate monthly** across 6-12 pilot locations
- Lead providers are encouraged to partner with grassroots arts organizations and individual artists to ensure cultural diversity and representation

Culture Kids funding would cover program expenses incurred by arts providers, reducing financial risk and supporting sustainability.

Photo: Arts+

Extending Culture Kids Beyond Anchor Sites Meeting Families Where They Are

In addition to community-based anchor sites, the pilot mapping process identified opportunities for Culture Kids to show up in spaces where families already are – particularly during the planning year and pilot phase. **These complementary touchpoints are intended to reduce barriers, increase exposure to the arts, and reinforce Culture Kids as a welcoming and accessible community presence. Potential pilot-phase extensions could include mobile health clinics, Meck Pre-K registration events, pediatrician offices, health centers, and community festivals.**

These lighter-touch Culture Kids moments would complement the consistency of the core pilot model, offering additional entry points for families to experience joy, wonder, and creative engagement. **By meeting families where they are and aligning arts experiences with trusted health and community settings, Culture Kids can broaden participation, spark curiosity, and strengthen connections across the community during the pilot phase.**



Governance and Operating Structure

Culture Kids is envisioned as a community-wide promise, coordinated by a neutral, independent entity. Charlotte Is Creative is recommended as the lead convener during the pilot phase, responsible for:

- Employing a Culture Kids Program Manager and support staff
- Coordinating with arts providers on training, curriculum themes, scheduling, and experience design
- Managing partnerships with libraries, health and community partners
- Overseeing infrastructure build-out, outreach, registration, and evaluation in collaboration with research partners

Photo: BOOM, Charlotte Observer

Phased Implementation Timeline

The recommended Culture Kids pilot is structured as a multi-year learning initiative, with each phase designed to support intentional implementation, continuous learning, and future decision-making.

YEAR 0 Planning, Readiness, Enrollment

Year 0 focuses on building the conditions for a successful pilot. Key activities include partner alignment and role clarification; training for participating arts providers and anchor-site staff; curriculum and experience development grounded in early childhood best practices; outreach planning and family enrollment; registration platform set-up; and the design of an evaluation framework in collaboration with research partners. This phase also includes final site selection and operational planning to ensure consistency and accessibility across pilot locations.

YEAR 1–2 Pilot Launch & Habit-Building

The first two years of implementation prioritize consistency, relationship-building, and family trust. Families participate in monthly Culture Kids experiences at their home anchor-site, establishing predictable routines and shared rituals. Ongoing feedback from families, arts providers, and partners informs iterative refinements to experience design, scheduling, and operations. Integration of health and community resources is also refined in these years.

YEAR 3–4 Expansion & Choice

As children grow, the pilot gradually introduces increased flexibility and choice. Families may follow an arts provider to additional locations or explore new disciplines aligned with their child's emerging interests. Evaluation efforts focus on participation patterns, sustained engagement, and transitions into the broader arts ecosystem.

YEAR 5 Culmination & Future Planning

The final year centers on synthesis and reflection. A culminating celebration brings together families, partners, and funders to mark the five-year journey of the pilot cohort. Findings from implementation and evaluation inform decisions about future scale, sustainability, and potential integration into broader city or county systems.

This pilot is intentionally designed as a test of how Culture Kids could become a universal, long-term investment in families with young children across Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The goal is not simply to launch a program, but to explore what it would take for early access to arts and culture to become a foundational part of life in Charlotte – something families can rely on from birth, and something that contributes to a shared sense of belonging, well-being, and connection.

Culture Kids positions Charlotte as a place willing to make a bold invitation to its youngest residents and their caregivers, while offering a model that other communities can learn from as they consider how arts and culture shape long-term individual and societal well-being.

Pilot Measurement and Evaluation



Prepared by the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute
Author: Khou Xiong, Director of Community Research Services

Measurement and evaluation efforts will include a process evaluation to assess the Culture Kids pilot implementation in Charlotte and ultimately inform which program structures, methods, and activities should be scaled for broader implementation. It also allows for the timely identification of challenges and testing of potential solutions during the pilot period.

The development of comprehensive administrative forms (e.g., initial registration form, attendance sheets, short feedback surveys after each session, observational checklist for each session, registry of participating arts organizations and other partners, feedback forms for arts organizations, etc.) and data management procedures will be essential for the accurate collection and monitoring of program data that will be used in the process evaluation. Interviews and/or focus group discussions with parents, art providers, and other partners are options for collecting deeper insights.

In addition to the process evaluation, a simplified outcome evaluation will examine any early impacts of Culture Kids on participants and their families. Final implementation plans for the pilot (i.e., inputs and activities), the availability of relevant datasets, and evidence from the existing literature will guide the selection of short-term and intermediate outcomes with possible causal relationships or associations for the outcome evaluation. A comprehensive impact evaluation is not advisable at this time, but findings from the pilot will provide invaluable insights on appropriate measures for long-term (10+ years) and community impact.

The following table includes a non-exhaustive, illustrative list of potential process outputs and outcome measures. Of note, extra consideration will be given to outcomes related to child and family quality of life, well-being, connection, academic readiness, and health and support services, as these are explicit priorities for Culture Kids.

Process Metrics (Outputs)	Possible Disaggregation
basic participant demographics	
# of families recruited	• by demographic variables • by invitation pathway
Avg attendance for monthly sessions	• by lead arts provider
# of families that attended only 1 session	
# of families that attended 6 or more sessions in 1 year	
# of families that attended 12 sessions in 1 year	
# of families that enrolled but did not attend any sessions	• by demographic variables
# of sessions attended by each family	
# of families that renewed annual commitment	• at year 1, year 2, year 3...

Process Outputs and Outcome Measure Table continued:

Process Metrics (Outputs)	Possible Disaggregation
# of lead arts organizations participated in pilot	
# of grassroots arts organizations participated	• culturally diverse representation
# of individual artists participated	
# of libraries participated	
# of trainings conducted	
# of trained persons	• in early childhood development • caregiver engagement
# of organizations with staff trained	• in early childhood development • caregiver engagement • demographic representation • grassroots representation
# of "connections" made (will need to define)	
barriers to participation	• variations by demographic variables
# of referrals to supportive HEALTH services	• types of services
# of referrals to SOCIAL support services	• types of services
# of HEALTH related resource materials provided	• types of services
Short-term and Intermediate Outcomes	**Possible Disaggregation**
• improved family bonding (will need to define, self-reported)	
• increased sense of belonging	
• [perceived] child development	
• kindergarten readiness	
• increased awareness of public services and resources	• by sector (housing, health, arts, etc)
• increased feelings of connectedness to community	

Culture Kids Pilot Budget Narrative & Assumptions

The Culture Kids Charlotte pilot budget is designed to support a five-year, learning-oriented pilot (with one initial planning year) that tests how early access to arts and culture can be delivered in a consistent, equitable, and sustainable way for families with young children across Charlotte-Mecklenburg. This budget reflects an intentional balance between ambition and feasibility, prioritizing quality, partner sustainability, and rigorous learning over immediate scale.

Purpose and Scope of the Pilot Budget
This budget supports a defined pilot cohort, rather than a countywide universal rollout. The intent is to test participation patterns, operational logistics, experience design, and evaluation methods before considering broader implementation. By structuring the budget around a pilot cohort and a limited number of anchor sites, Culture Kids can generate meaningful insights while minimizing risk and ensuring high-quality delivery. The budget assumes monthly programming, consistent engagement over time, and a five-year horizon that aligns with early childhood developmental milestones.

Arts Organizations
Funding allocated to arts providers covers artist fees, program development, materials, preparation time, and travel. This approach reflects findings from the asset map, which revealed that many "free" programs rely on unstable funding sources and unpaid labor, creating inconsistency for families and financial strain for organizations.

By compensating arts partners directly, the Culture Kids budget reduces financial risk, supports sustainability, and enables organizations to plan and deliver developmentally appropriate, high-quality experiences. This investment positions Culture Kids as a stabilizing force within the local arts ecosystem rather than an additional burden.

Infrastructure & Staffing
The budget includes dedicated resources for program coordination and staffing, which would be managed by Charlotte Is Creative. As demonstrated by Helsinki's Culture Kids program, a centralized coordinating organization is essential to supporting cross-sector collaboration, ensuring consistency, and sustaining quality across partners. Centralized staffing supports infrastructure development, partner alignment, artist training, scheduling, experience design, communication with families, and coordination with host sites and research partners. These roles are essential to maintaining a cohesive experience for families and partners over the years.
The budget assumes the use of trusted community spaces, particularly libraries, as anchor sites. Leveraging existing public infrastructure helps reduce facility costs.

Evaluation and Learning
Evaluation is embedded in the pilot budget as a core component, not an add-on. Funding supports partnership with research and evaluation experts at UNC Charlotte Urban Institute to measure participation, caregiver experience, and indicators related to child development, family well-being, and social connection. These efforts are designed to inform continuous improvement during the pilot and provide a strong evidence base for future funding and scale decisions.

A Learning Investment: Ultimately, this budget represents an investment in learning. The insights generated through this pilot will inform decisions about future scale, sustainability, and the role Culture Kids could play as a long-term civic commitment for Charlotte–Mecklenburg residents.

Recommended Culture Kids 5-Year Pilot Budget
(Includes Planning Year)

CK Website & Registration Tool

Infrastructure & Staffing

Arts Experience Providers

Recruitment & Enrollment

Supplies for Libraries & Community Partners

Evaluation & Learning

TECHNOLOGY & INFRASTRUCTURE	
Registration Website & Database (Development)	$100,000
Registration Website & Database (Maintenance)	$180,000
Subtotal	**$280,000**
PERSONNEL & STAFFING	
Culture Kids Program Manager (Full-time)	$390,000
CIC Support Staffing (Admin/Coordination)	$420,000
Subtotal	**$810,000**
ARTS ORGANIZATION SUPPORT (12 Organizations)	
Arts Org Planning/Admin Costs	$360,000
Artist/Facilitator Fees	$300,000
Artist/Facilitator Supplies	$600,000
Community Pop-Ups	$50,000
Training - Early Childhood Engagement	$30,000
Subtotal	**$1,340,000**
SAFETY & COMPLIANCE	
Background Checks (Arts Providers)	$6,500
Subtotal	**$6,500**
MARKETING & OUTREACH	
Marketing & Promotion	$85,000
Printing Costs (Welcome Cards, Materials)	$30,000
Subtotal	**$115,000**
PROGRAMMING	
Library Materials & Resources	$25,000
Subtotal	**$25,000**
EVALUATION & IMPACT	
Program Evaluation & Assessment	$151,000
Subtotal	**$151,000**
CONTINGENCY (10% of Program Costs)	
Contingency Fund	$272,750
Subtotal	**$272,750**
GRAND TOTAL	**$3,000,250**
Annual cost per family (600 families)	$1,000
5-year cost per family (600 families)	$5,000

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS & POLICYMAKERS

Supporting a Five-Year Culture Kids Pilot

Charlotte-Mecklenburg has a long and successful history of public-private collaboration in service of the public good. From major investments in education, health, and infrastructure to cross-sector initiatives addressing opportunity, mobility, and well-being, the region has repeatedly demonstrated that complex challenges are best addressed through shared responsibility. Culture Kids builds on this tradition, offering a timely opportunity for funders, policymakers, and civic leaders to work together in support of children, families, and community connection.

The Culture Kids research and development phase surfaced a clear finding: there is strong enthusiasm across sectors for a coordinated, early-intervention approach that connects children and their families to arts and creativity from birth. Moving from concept to impact will require thoughtful investment, aligned policy support, and sustained collaboration over time. The recommendations below outline how public and private partners can help bring an initial five-year pilot to life.



Why a Five-Year Pilot Matters

A five-year pilot allows Culture Kids to do more than test isolated activities. It creates the conditions for learning, adaptation, and trust-building across systems. Early childhood development is inherently longitudinal. Relationships with families, arts organizations, and community partners deepen over time, and meaningful outcomes emerge through consistent engagement rather than one-time exposure.

Five years is also a particularly appropriate timeframe because it aligns with a child's earliest developmental journey. Most children begin kindergarten at age five, making this period a natural arc for a program focused on early learning, healthy brain development, and family and community connection. A Culture Kids pilot that begins at birth and continues through the start of formal schooling allows the program to support families during the most formative years of a child's life, while also creating a clear transition point as children enter the K–12 system.

This timeframe makes it possible to assess not only participation, but continuity, equity of access, and developmental impact over time. It allows partners to observe how repeated, age-appropriate arts experiences influence caregiver-child relationships, social connection, and readiness for school, while also giving arts organizations the opportunity to build sustained relationships with families.

A five-year pilot could also align well with public planning cycles and philanthropic strategies, offering partners a defined window for investment paired with flexibility to refine the model as lessons emerge. By the time the first cohort of children reaches kindergarten, the community will have meaningful data, shared learning, and a strong foundation to inform decisions about long-term sustainability and expansion.

Photo: Charlotte Symphony, Daniel Coston

Culture Kids Ecosystem in Helsinki

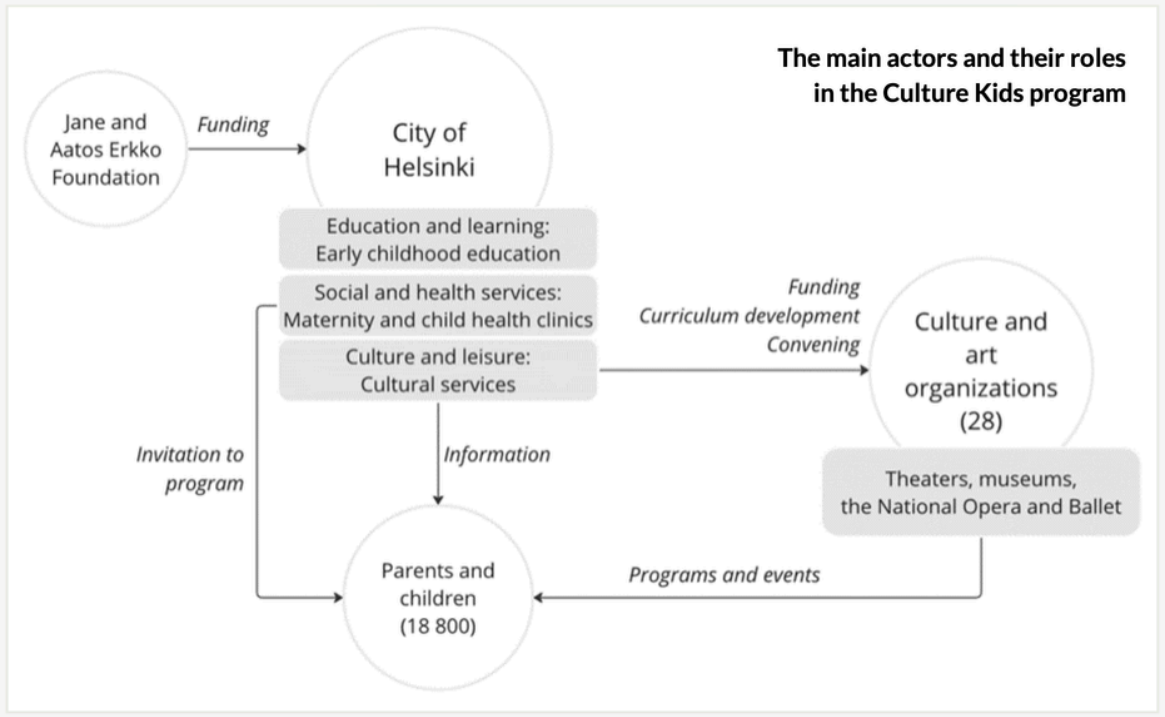
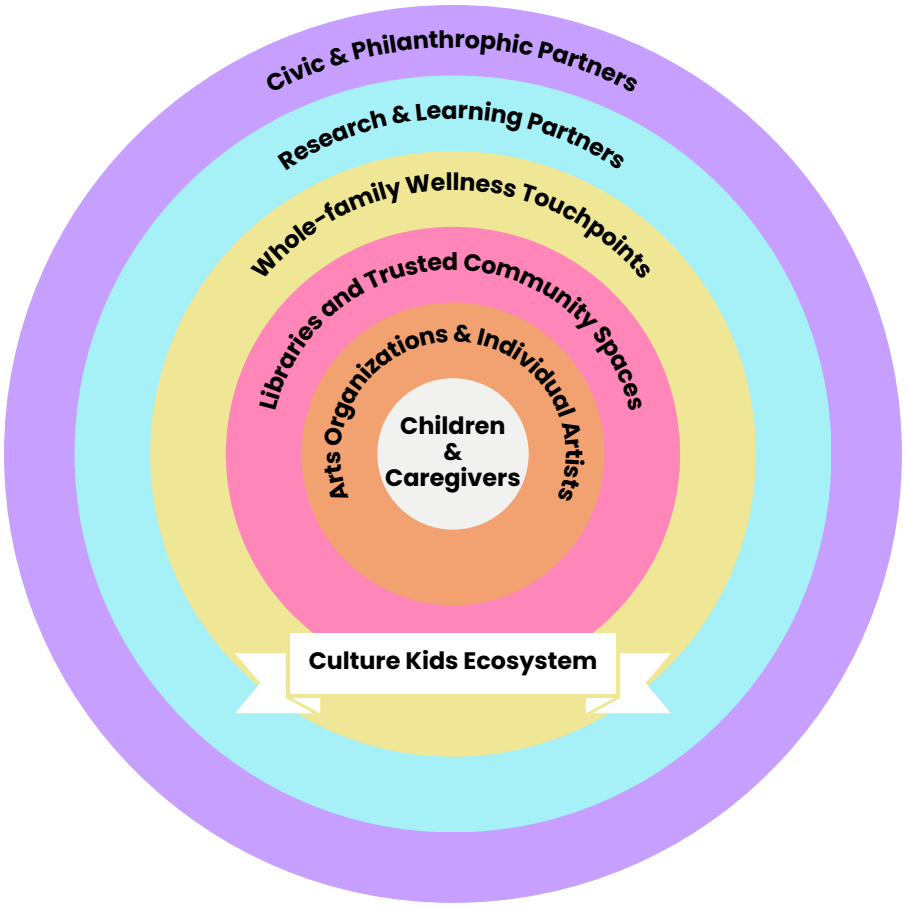


Diagram: Acts of Purpose Report

Recommended Culture Kids Ecosystem in Charlotte, NC



The Role of Public Partners

Public partners play a critical role in creating the conditions for Culture Kids to succeed at scale. Their involvement signals that early arts engagement is not a niche initiative, but a shared civic priority.

Policy Alignment and Endorsement

City and county leaders can support Culture Kids by formally recognizing early arts engagement as a contributor to health, educational readiness, and community well-being. This includes aligning Culture Kids with existing priorities related to early childhood education, health access, equity, and neighborhood vitality.

Systems Integration

Public agencies can help embed Culture Kids into trusted systems families already use, such as pediatric and maternal health clinics, early learning enrollment, libraries, and recreation centers. This integration is essential to ensuring the program is trusted, universal, proactive, and equitable, rather than reliant on self-selection.

Seed Funding and Infrastructure Support

Public investment working in collaboration with private philanthropic funders has long played a catalytic role in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, supporting innovation, piloting new ideas, and bridging gaps between sectors. Culture Kids offers a clear opportunity for private and philanthropic funders to join forces with public partners in investing in preventive, upstream impact. This dual investment approach can help establish the backbone infrastructure needed for coordination, data collection, partner support and program delivery. This also includes funding for program administration, evaluation, and capacity-building for participating arts organizations, particularly grassroots and culturally specific groups.

Equity-Focused Implementation

Public partners can help guide pilot design toward communities with the greatest need, ensuring that Culture Kids reaches families across zip codes, income levels, and cultural backgrounds. By centering equity early, the program can model inclusive practice from the outset.



Photo: The Mint Museum, Jon Strayhorn

CONCLUSION

A Call to Build What Comes Next

Culture Kids emerged from a simple but powerful question: What if every child in Charlotte-Mecklenburg began life with an invitation to creativity, connection, and belonging? Over the course of this research and development phase, that question has been explored through conversations, data, research, and shared imagination. What has become clear is that Culture Kids is not only possible in Charlotte – it is also timely, relevant, and deeply aligned with the values and priorities of this community.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg has the assets, relationships, and civic will to make early arts engagement a foundational part of family life. Arts organizations are eager to collaborate. Health and education partners recognize the importance of early intervention and social connection. Families are seeking joyful, accessible experiences that support their children's development and help them feel less alone. Culture Kids offers a framework that brings these elements together in a coordinated, inclusive way.

A Call to Action

The next phase of Culture Kids will require collective leadership and shared investment. No single sector can carry this work alone, nor should it. The strength of Culture Kids lies in its ability to unite partners around a common purpose.

For Funders, this is an opportunity to invest upstream, where impact is both profound and enduring. Supporting an initial five-year pilot will help build the infrastructure, learning systems, and partnerships needed to move from concept to practice. Philanthropic leadership can catalyze innovation, support evaluation, and ensure arts organizations are resourced to participate fully and sustainably.

For Civic Leaders and Policymakers, Culture Kids offers a practical way to advance existing priorities related to early childhood education, health access, equity, and quality of life. By aligning policy support and public resources with this effort, leaders can help embed creativity into the systems families already trust, ensuring the program is universal, proactive, and equitable.

For Arts, Health, and Community Partners, Culture Kids represents an invitation to co-create. Participation means shaping a program that reflects Charlotte's cultural diversity, meets families where they are, and models collaboration over competition. It also offers an opportunity to strengthen Charlotte's creative economy by creating reliable, values-aligned revenue streams for arts organizations and individual artists. By compensating artists for their work and embedding creative practice more deeply into health, education, and community settings, Culture Kids helps weave artists into the overall wellness infrastructure of the region. This approach not only supports sustainable creative livelihoods, but also reinforces the arts as essential contributors to a healthier, more connected community.

Together, these partners can help move Culture Kids from vision to reality, ensuring that it is built *with* the community rather than simply *for* it.

A Vision for Long-Term Sustainability

While this report focuses on the research and development phase and the potential for a five-year pilot, the long-term vision for Culture Kids extends further. Sustainability will depend on three core principles: shared ownership, integration into existing systems, and ongoing learning.

First, Culture Kids must continue to be stewarded collaboratively, with governance structures that reflect the voices of arts organizations, health and education partners, families, funders, and public agencies. Shared ownership builds trust, accountability, and resilience over time.

Second, long-term sustainability will require embedding Culture Kids into the fabric of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's early childhood and community systems. When creative experiences are integrated into healthcare touchpoints, schools, libraries, and neighborhood spaces, they become part of everyday life rather than an add-on program. This integration reduces barriers, increases reach, and positions the arts as a core contributor to public well-being.

Finally, sustainability depends on a commitment to learning and adaptation. Ongoing research and evaluation, feedback from families, and cross-sector reflection will allow Culture Kids to evolve as the community evolves. Just like our ever-evolving community, the goal is not a static program, but a living model that responds to what families need and what the data reveals.



Looking Ahead

Culture Kids offers Charlotte-Mecklenburg an opportunity to lead by example on the national stage – demonstrating how creativity, when treated as essential, can strengthen families and communities from the very beginning. It invites our region to imagine a future where every child's first years are enriched by wonder, curiosity, and shared experience, and where caregivers feel supported, connected, and welcomed into both cultural life and the community as a whole.

This report marks the end of one phase and the beginning of another. The research and development work has laid a strong foundation. The next step is collective action. With aligned leadership, sustained investment, and a shared commitment to belonging, Culture Kids can become a defining expression of Charlotte's values, ensuring that the city's youngest residents grow up knowing they are part of a community that cares deeply about them, believes in their potential, and is willing to invest in the experiences and resources that help them lead lives of purpose, success, and fulfillment.

Photo: Charlotte Symphony, Genesis Photography

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Charlotte Is Creative extends deep gratitude to **The Gambrell Foundation** for its vision, leadership, and trust in supporting this research and development phase of Culture Kids. Your belief in the power of arts, culture, and community well-being – and your willingness to invest in exploration – made it possible to ask bold questions about what early childhood could look like in Charlotte-Mecklenburg.

We are profoundly thankful to the **arts organizations, health leaders, community partners,** and **early childhood experts** who generously shared their time, insight, and care throughout this process. Through one-on-one conversations, design sessions, pilot mapping convenings, and ongoing dialogue, your openness and collaboration shaped the thinking, values, and recommendations reflected in this report. Culture Kids is stronger because of your willingness to imagine alongside us.

We are especially grateful to **Studio Laitio** and the **Helsinki Culture Kids** team for their transparency and belief in this work. Your leadership in Helsinki, and your openness in sharing both the vision and the operational realities of Culture Kids, provided critical inspiration and grounding. Your conviction in the importance of early access to arts and culture was a compelling catalyst for exploring how this model might take shape in Charlotte.

Finally, this work is ultimately for the **young children and families of our community** – for those who arrive wide-eyed, curious, and full of possibility. We believe deeply in their capacity for joy, imagination, connection, and lifelong success and fulfillment. **They are the inspiration behind Culture Kids, and for them, we remain committed to exploring meaningful ways to enrich early life through artistic experiences that nurture wonder, belonging, development and well-being.**



Photo: Culture Kids Helsinki, Maarit Hohteri

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Photos Courtesy of:
Arts+ | Arts + Mind Lab | The Bechtler Museum of Modern Art | Camp North End Website | Charlotte Observer: Boom Charlotte | Charlotte Parent: Charlotte SHOUT! What Families Need to Know | Charlotte Symphony Orchestra | Children's Theater of Charlotte | Cision News, Helsinki City of Helsinki Website | Forbes: Art After Stroke Shows That Creativity Uses Both Sides of Your Brain, Eva Amsen - GETTY IMAGES | The Gambrell Foundation | The Mint Museum
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APPENDIX: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Sector: Arts & Culture

- **Arts and Science Council**, One-on-one interview
- **Arts Empowerment Project**, One-on-one interview; Design Session
- **Arts+**, One-on-one interview; Design Session; Pilot Mapping Session
- **Blumenthal Performing Arts Center**, One-on-one interview
- **Carolinas Asian American Chamber of Commerce**, One-on-one interview
- **Charlotte Ballet**, One-on-one interview; Design Session; Pilot Mapping Session
- **Charlotte Symphony Orchestra**, One-on-one interview; Design Session; Pilot Mapping Session
- **Children's Theatre of Charlotte**, One-on-one interview; Design Session; Pilot Mapping Session; Survey Distribution
- **Davidson Community Players**, One-on-one interview
- **Harvey B. Gantt Center**, One-on-one interview
- **India Association of Charlotte**, One-on-one interview; Survey Distribution
- **JazzArts Charlotte**, One-on-one interview
- **La Casa de la Cultura**, One-on-one interview; Design Session
- **Matthews Playhouse of the Performing Arts**, One-on-one interview; Design Session; Survey Distribution
- **Mint Museum of Art**, One-on-one interview; Design Session; Pilot Mapping Session; Survey Distribution
- **Music Together of Charlotte**, One-on-one interview
- **Namaste Artists**, One-on-one interview
- **Opera Carolina**, One-on-one interview
- **The Bechtler Museum of Modern Art**, One-on-one interview; Design Session; Pilot Mapping Session; Survey Distribution
- **Theatre Charlotte**, One-on-one interview
- **Three Bone Theater**, One-on-one interview
- **Tosco Music**, One-on-one interview; Survey Distribution
- **We Rock CLT**, One-on-one interview; Design Session

Sector: Early Childhood & Family Support

- **Reach Out and Read North Carolina**, One-on-one interview
- **Smart Start**, One-on-one interview; Design Session; Survey Distribution
- **YMCA**, One-on-one interview

Sector: Education & Research

- **Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools**, One-on-one interview
- **UNC Charlotte Urban Institute**, One-on-one interview; Design Session, Survey Facilitation & analysis

Sector: Healthcare & Health Services

- **Atrium Health**, One-on-one interview; Survey Distribution
- **Care Ring**, One-on-one interview
- **Novant Health**, One-on-one interview; Design Session; Survey Distribution

Sector: Libraries & Cultural Infrastructure

- **Charlotte Mecklenburg Library**, One-on-one interview

Sector: Philanthropy & Private Funders

- **PNC Bank**, One-on-one interview
- **The Leon Levine Foundation**, One-on-one interview
- **The Merancas Foundation**, One-on-one interview

Sector: Public Sector / Government

- **Mecklenburg County**, One-on-one interview

Interviewees

- Ally, Mike Rizer, Executive Director, Corporate Affairs
- Arts and Science Council, Adam Santalla Pierce, President
- Arts Empowerment Project, Natalie Frazier Allen, Founder
- Arts+, Shane Agostinelli, Creative Director
- Atrium Health, Dr. Lyn Nuse, Pediatrics
- Blumenthal Performing Arts Center, Tom Gabbard, President & CEO; Andie Maloney, Chief Education Officer
- Care Ring, Tchernavia Montgomery, CEO
- Carolinas Asian American Chamber of Commerce, Ann Gonzales, President & CEO
- Charlotte Ballet, Kimberly Pereira, Director of Education & Community Engagement; Deborah Maine, Community Engagement Coordinator & Teaching Artist
- Charlotte Mecklenburg Library, Jesse Isley, Senior Program Manager - Children's Services; Emily Nanney, MLIS, Associate Director - Programs; Jess Schauble, Main Library Program Manager
- Charlotte Symphony Orchestra, David Fisk, President & CEO; Aram Kim Bryan, Vice President of Learning & Community Engagement
- Children's Theatre of Charlotte, Nao Tsuramaki, Managing Director
- CMS, Justin Pierce, Lead Media Arts Teacher
- Davidson Community Players, Katie Mullis, Education Director
- Harvey B. Gantt Center, Bonita Buford, President & CEO
- India Association of Charlotte, Lal Vishin, President
- JazzArts Charlotte, Lonnie Davis, President & CEO
- La Casa de la Cultura, Milagros & Keudis Sanchez, Founders & Directors
- Matthews Playhouse of the Performing Arts, Sarah Baumgardner, Executive Director
- Mecklenburg County, Dr. Raynard Washington, Director of the Public Health Department; Susan Rodriguez-McDowell, Commissioner, Board of County Commissioners, District 6

Interviewees

- Mint Museum of Art, Todd A. Herman, Chief Executive Officer and President; Cynthia Moreno, Senior Director of Learning and Engagement; Leslie Strauss, Head of Family and Studio Programs; Alexandra Olivares, Audience Research and Evaluation Specialist; Ramona Holloway, Community Relations and Civic Engagement Director
- Music Together of Charlotte, Cecily Manejwala, Administrator
- Namaste Artists, Shefalee Patel, Artist & Community Connector
- Novant Health, Kristen Howard, VP and Chief Board Governance Officer; Sharon Harrington, Chief Philanthropy Officer; Joyce Cadesca, Corporate Director, Community Engagement; Shana Templin, Arts in Health Facilitator
- Opera Carolina, Teil Taliesen, Learnings Program Manager
- PNC Bank, Maddie Myers, Client and Community Relations Director
- Reach Out and Read North Carolina, Anna Brothers, Program Manager of Greater Mecklenburg NC
- Smart Start, Nicole Campbell, Chief Impact Officer; Bibiana Lucumi, The Basics Mecklenburg Manager; Alyssa Wood, Early Literacy Manager
- The Bechtler Museum of Modern Art, Todd D. Smith, Executive Director; Molly Phillips, Assistant Director for Education
- The Leon Levine Foundation, Russell Altenburg, Senior Program Officer, Education
- The Merancas Foundation, Deepa Naik, Senior Director of Impact
- Theatre Charlotte, Lisa Blanton, Managing Director
- Three Bone Theater, Robin TyneS-Miller, Artistic and Operations Director
- Tosco Music, John Tosco, Founder; Amy Leary
- UNC Charlotte Urban Institute, Khou Xiong, Director of Community Research Services; Bridget Anderson, Senior Research Associate; Mecca Howe, Research Associate
- We Rock CLT, Brit Swider, Executive Director; Krystle Baller, Director & Co-Founder
- YMCA, Joan Llaneza, Senior Arts Director at YMCA of Greater Charlotte

CULTURE KIDS
RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT REPORT (2026)

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This report was generously commissioned by The Gambrell Foundation to examine how early access to arts and culture can support child development, family well-being, and a more connected Charlotte-Mecklenburg. We are deeply grateful for the insights from arts organizations, healthcare and community partners, civic leaders, and families who participated in interviews, surveys, and collaborative design sessions.

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