

Accessing the arts: Accounting for neurodiversity and disability in performing arts feedback methods

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Table of Contents

Project Collaborators	2
Xenia Concerts	2
Canada Excellence Research Chair - Health Equity and Community Wellbeing (CERC-HECW)	2
Background	3
Introduction and project overview	3
Literature Review	4
Feedback method design	6
Implementation and findings	8
1. Card Sorting	9
2. Write and draw group storyboards	9
3. Interview booth	10
Further reflections	11
Limitations and recommendations	12
References	16

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Project Collaborators

Xenia Concerts

Xenia Concerts (“Xenia”) is dedicated to working with the neurodiversity and disability communities to design, produce, and present exceptional performing arts experiences that support the needs of neurodivergent and disabled attendees. At the core of Xenia’s programming are adaptive concerts, hour-long family-friendly events designed to be inclusive and accessible for those who face barriers to attending typical events.

Canada Excellence Research Chair - Health Equity and Community Wellbeing (CERC-HECW)

The CERC-HECW positions health equity as a strategic imperative – one that must be at the heart of systemic change to co-create community wellbeing. The CERC-HECW collaborates with communities, civil society, and formal health-care providers to co-create new knowledge frameworks. Outcomes on core questions of health inequity and community well-being, in turn, will lead to broad policy change and social innovation. Working under the CERC-HECW’s research stream on the social determinants of health, Dr. Temba Middelman is the Postdoctoral Fellow in Arts, Healing and Wellbeing, who represented the CERC-HECW on this project and in this partnership. Danielle Licorish (pilot design and implementation; literature searches) and Eshtar Taha (literature review write-up) worked as student research assistants on the project.

Background

Traditional arts programming has frequently failed to consider the needs of neurodivergent and disabled individuals (Richards & Parkes, 2023). This has created barriers to disabled participation in art spaces and research gaps in our understanding of the needs, experiences, and interests of neurodivergent/disabled audiences concerning the arts (Jones et al, 2022). As a registered charity aimed at providing accessible programming to neurodivergent and disabled communities, Xenia Concerts aims to enhance their methods for gathering and evaluating event feedback from neurodivergent and disabled audiences, particularly children and youth. Xenia and the CERC came together here based on a mutual belief around the importance of access to the arts for individual and collective wellbeing. This report explores the process of researching, designing, and implementing new methods for seeking audience feedback at Xenia Concerts. This phase of the research was rooted in an ongoing partnership between Xenia Concerts and CERC-HECW, based on the mutual

belief in the importance of access to the arts, and as such the need to deepen practices of co-creation through innovative feedback methods. The CERC funded a student research assistant to work as a research intern at Xenia over the summer of 2025. Under the supervision of Xenia’s Executive and Artistic Director (“EAD”) and the CERC’s post-doctoral fellow (“PDF”), Danielle Licorish was hired to design and implement the pilot feedback methods discussed in this report, and Eshtar Taha worked on the literature review.

Introduction and project overview

The goal of this project was to pilot alternative feedback methods geared at gathering information directly from Xenia’s child and youth participants. The design of methods built on a literature review of relevant, current work on engaging with disabled and neurodivergent young people, combined with existing knowledge and approaches used in adaptive and sensory-friendly concerts. This was informed by the need to explore alternatives to written surveys, which for several years had been Xenia’s primary method of requesting audience feedback. The key challenge to accessibility and inclusivity with Xenia’s existing feedback mechanisms was the disjuncture between the large and growing diversity of Xenia’s audience members (age, disability(s), neurocognitive styles), and a core feedback method that didn’t allow for equal engagement by all audiences. Important here, given Xenia’s focus on youth and children, was how the written survey format tended to give primacy to the perspectives of parents and caregivers, rather than the youth and children themselves. In this context, the need to explore alternative feedback approaches emerged. Responding to diverse ways of understanding, it was necessary to explore a diversity of feedback methods.

Traditional formats for audience feedback, such as written service surveys, may not align with the diverse needs of individuals with disabilities or various forms of neurodivergence. Accordingly, for organizations to effectively assess the successes and failures of their programs and services, it is crucial to implement feedback collection methods that are accessible to a widening range of audiences. In line with the broader work of accessibility and inclusion in the concert space, the rationale for expanding feedback methods was to seek alternative communication methods for gauging engagement and enjoyment of all participants. By expanding the ways in which feedback is collected, and including a wider cross-section of attendees, insight is gained into increasing accessibility and widening inclusion at Xenia’s concerts. In turn, collecting a wider variety of feedback over time reveals more nuanced understandings of the impacts of adaptive concerts on the lives of those attending. As such, the feedback pilots are part of Xenia’s broader work in striving to improve accessibility in the arts, especially for neurodivergent and disabled children.

The report demonstrates the methods piloted during Xenia's July 2024 programming, and reflects on the pros and cons of each for effectively collecting feedback more directly from young, neurodivergent and disabled audiences. It provides recommendations for promising practices in creating inclusive event participant feedback methods, and notes some areas of complexity and directions for further research. Reflecting also on the data and feedback captured during these pilot sessions, the report's findings will also expand current understandings of the impact of adaptive arts programming on the wellbeing of neurodivergent and disabled individuals.

Literature Review

There is not a great deal of literature focused directly on collecting feedback from disabled children and youth on concert experiences. However, by drawing on aspects of several thematic areas of literature, and bringing ideas from different fields together, it was possible to design feedback methods by current theories and praxis. For instance, while feedback mechanisms for disabled and neurodivergent youth in cultural and artistic settings are not commonly reported on, there is useful literature to guide this when drawing from reports on conducting research or teaching disabled and neurodivergent youth (e.g. Saltmarsh et al, 2016). Some critical theory on the impacts of arts and culture (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016) have suggested too many arts organizations focus on quantitative measures such as attendance numbers, to measure their impact, at the expense of deeper understanding of the individual and collective experiences of attending arts. As such, this series of pilot methods is also a part of a shift towards centering the experience of the arts in how we understand its impact, notwithstanding the difficulties of fully capturing and understanding what are deeply complex, multi-faceted experiences of arts and culture (ibid.). Due to this focus on people's experiences, the pilot methods focus on collecting qualitative data, which can have tensions with comparability of data in general. While attendance numbers may be more easily comparable, a deeper understanding of people's unique experiences is key to making concert experiences more accessible.

There are various barriers to the full participation of disabled and neurodivergent youth and children in arts and cultural events and experiences. Some of these are driven by stigma and ableism (Davis 1995), while others involve lacking accommodations for different ways of being and engaging in concert spaces (Jones et al 2022). Relating to the multiple and diverse ways of being and engaging, adaptive concerts aim to provide diverse supports (Jones et al 2022), and in turn this drives the need for diverse methods of feedback gathering. Fletcher et al (2019) show how children with disabilities tend to participate and engage differently to their peers, with the suggestion of multi-sensory environments, which can be created to meet a child's sensory needs and reduce anxieties. Helpful in these terms and for designing the pilot methods is the work of Saltmarsh et al (2016) who explore creative methods

for supportive, inclusive environments using tools like visual props, talking mats or responding to the child's own system/method of communication. Approaches that utilise multiple methods in response to multiple learning styles embody a creativity and flexibility that is important for engaging people with learning disabilities (Ball and Shanks 2012). In line with this, 'arts-based research' can be a 'powerful way for children across a wide range of the developmental continuum to express their views' despite challenges with collecting and comparing data (Coad et al 2009: 58). Developing these activities for use in research can be challenging. These methods and insights informed the design of the feedback stations to utilise an art-based, pedagogical aesthetic.

Various related research has explored power imbalances when engaging young people with disabilities, which often manifest between researchers and children, or even between parents/caregivers and children (Ryan and Runswick-Cole 2014; Anderson and Balandin 2011). Accordingly, it is important to focus on facilitating and listening to the voice of the child, noting that this may or may not be expressed verbally (Collogan et al 2019). This contributes to work on centring children as meaning makers in interviews and research, such as Clark and Moss (2011) whose mosaic approach that mixes both verbal and visual communication informed this project. The mosaic approach provides a range of opportunities for children to express themselves, utilising a mix of observation, interviews, questionnaires, structured activities and multisensory approaches. These different methods are necessary because the goal isn't to triangulate one simple answer, but to show the complexities of children expressing their lived experience.

Feedback method design

The pilot series was designed to get a sense of what feedback methods would allow children and youth to engage directly and share their feedback. Based on the literature review as well as reflections on the data and methods of previous surveys, guiding questions for the design of future feedback methods emerged. These guiding questions related to:

- centring children/youth experiences and voices;
- catering to a variety of preferred embodied/tactile, visual or auditory engagement methods;
- creating feedback methods that were attractive and engaging; and
- designing methods where data would be relatively meaningful and produce comparable, measurable results.

Three feedback pilot methods were designed to survey neurodivergent and disabled children after sensory-friendly concerts, aiming to capture a broad spectrum of experiences from different attendees. These methods provided new ways to gain the perspectives of children and youth attending Xenia's concerts, with lessons on how to

make this feedback gathering more efficient, meaningful, and engaging. The first method was a tactile interactive message board (involving an adaptation of likert scaling for use with children); the second was a group storyboard where participants could draw or write out their responses and collaboratively demonstrate their experiences; and the third method was an audio-visual interview station.

The different feedback methods were all designed around questions similar to those used in previous feedback surveys with a view to ensuring some comparability across methods and over time. The broad questions included:

- Which access features did you use?
- What made you feel good/welcome/positive?
- What made you feel bad/unwelcome/negative?
- What would you change?

Card Sorting: Participants were invited to provide their opinions on which accessibility features they used and preferred. This method used multisensory displays similarly to the picture communication symbols used in speech therapy sets or picture schedules for autistic people. The facilitator guided participants through sorting and selecting symbols under the categories “Helpful”, “Not Helpful”, and “Unsure” using the prompt, “What accessibility features did you use?” Participants were allowed to place as many or as few cards on the board as they would like. The aim was to support participants in expressing their preferences and accessibility needs by combining written words, spoken conversation, and images to ease comprehension. This method was informed by the Talking Mats where talking is used as a decision aid and in conversations between participants and facilitators (Saltmarsh et al, 2016), and also builds on Likert scale adaptations for children (Royeen 1985). The card sorting activity was designed for simple set-up and tear-down so that it could easily be moved and used at a variety of events. After each participant, the facilitator would take a photo of the entire whiteboard and table, note any cards that were unused, and return the cards to their original places for the next participant.



Fig. 1: Card sorting station

Group Storyboards: The Write or Draw station offered 3 large blank pages, each with one question prompt, for participants to write or draw about their Xenia experience. Facilitators ensured that there was enough space and writing materials for each participant to write or attach their contribution to the poster sheets, and otherwise allow participants to engage freely. This allowed a group-based story-board to emerge with potential for collaboration. At the end of the event, the facilitator documented the response sheets (4 photos total — 1 of the entire wall and 1 of each sheet/question individually).



Fig. 2: Group storyboard station

Interview booth: The interview booth offered an opportunity for participants to provide feedback in a 1-on-1 interview format. The facilitator would initiate and record conversation with participants (either audio or video depending on preference). While still guided by the same overall questions listed above, this method also involved asking open-ended questions and following up to encourage detailed responses. Props were offered to encourage youth engagement.



Fig. 3: Interview booth station

Implementation and findings

In July 2024, Xenia conducted three pilots of these methods within their programming, offering each of the three new methods alongside the traditional written survey at each event. Each of the three concerts were in different locations, and involved slightly different audience make-ups. While all three were open to all ages, the first (July 13) was the ASD Youth Council concert, designed by a group of Autistic youth primarily for people ages 13 and above; the second (July 20) was a child-oriented introduction to opera that attracted mostly 6-12-year-olds and their caregivers; and the third was an adaptive concert in Parry Sound, featuring a piano duo and a mime artist, which attracted some families with young children and a large daycare group made up of mostly toddlers.

After each concert, children and their families were invited verbally to the feedback area to share their experiences. A brief description of the feedback methods was provided as part of the note of thanks at the concert's closing, but the details of each method were only shared when people entered the designated feedback area. This continued the interplay between active facilitation/instruction and openness for people to engage organically.

Designing the pilot methods involved seeking a balance between maintaining a level of uniformity (for replicability) for each method, and making iterative changes between each session to establish clearer pros and cons for each method. After each event, the team made minor tweaks to each method to make them more engaging, user-friendly, and clear, and to capture more meaningful data.

1. Card Sorting

This approach was the most time- and energy-consuming method. Facilitators noted that this method required very active interaction to be effective. The method of sorting and arranging the cards appeared not to be as intuitive as the storyboard method, for instance. While this meant that it was time-consuming and some attendees did not complete sorting all the cards, in some cases the process of facilitating and sorting allowed generative conversations to emerge between the facilitator and attendee. If the challenges with this method are overcome, the data is more comparable than for other methods. Depending on the participant, this method could be used to elicit important insights about the relative importance and effectiveness of different accessibility accommodations.

2. Write and draw group storyboards

This approach resulted in the highest levels of engagement and interest by youth/children as well as their caregivers, drawing consistently more responses than the other methods. The intuitive design was a strength, and users seemed to naturally understand how it worked when they saw the blank pages, questions, and stationery. The open-endedness appears to have pros as well as cons. It attracted a lot of engagement, and children/youth as well as caregivers were able to get involved and express themselves. However, the mixture of types and styles of response, from sentences, to comments, to drawings, does not create immediately/easily comparable data. In some cases it could be unclear whether multiple responses were from the same participant. In later iterations of the pilot, facilitators requested children to add their age next to their response as a way of tracking inputs to some degree.

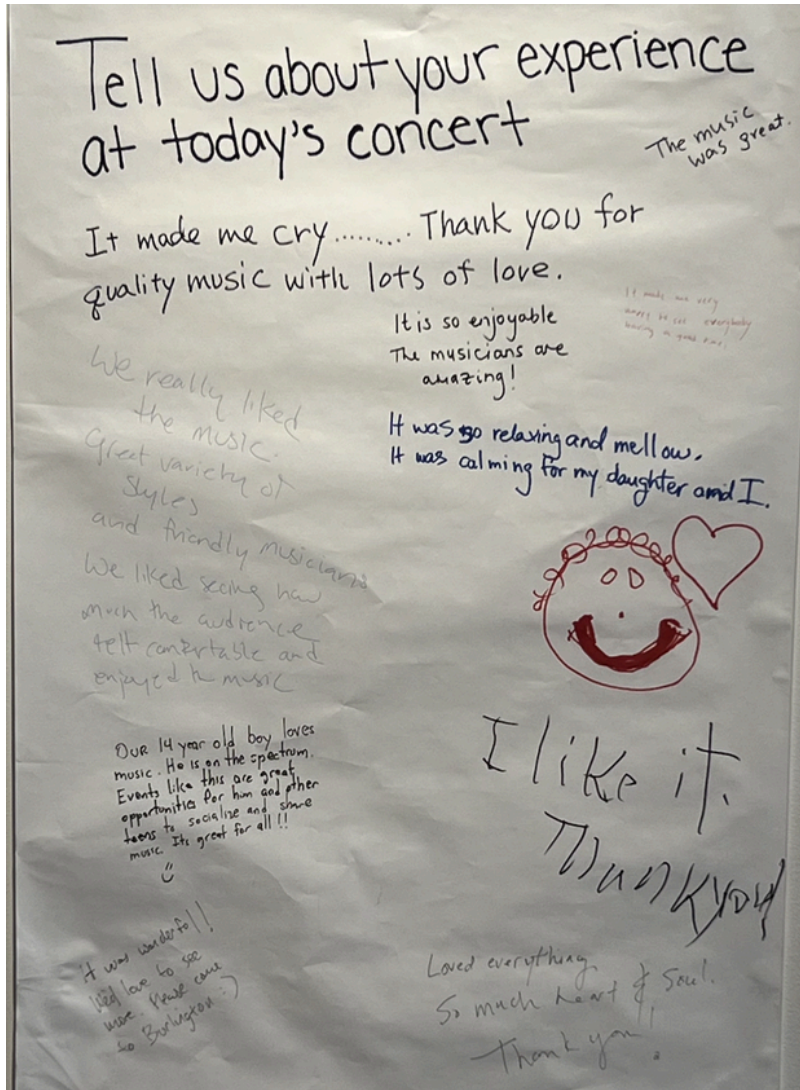


Fig. 4: A completed page of the group storyboard after a Xenia Concert

3. Interview booth

Of the three methods, this was the least popular among participants. Of the few people who offered to be interviewed, several took some time to get used to the camera and the facilitator. Another reflection from a facilitator was that the interviews could take up to several minutes each, which means it is difficult to conduct with larger numbers of participants. This approach presented unique opportunities to get in-depth, fine-grained qualitative data about audience experience; however, it was challenging to implement in a way that was highly engaging, clear and attractive. At one event, props were displayed in an attempt to make the interview booth more attractive, though for some attendees it was confusing whether the props were more sensory supports on offer for the concert (Xenia's usual offering of fidget toys, weighted blankets, and other sensory supports were displayed on a nearby table). This method also requires active facilitation, as

well as access to a recording device. There was some concern about the length and volume of interviews regarding participant privacy and facilitator capacity, and agreed that a smaller number of interviews could still be conducted at each event. Because this activity was set up in the same area as the other feedback methods, the ambient sound in the concert venue also made it difficult to carry on a conversation and capture the audio. In future pilots, the team plans to use a small plug-in microphone attached to a smartphone to capture the participants' comments.

Further reflections

Some of the prevalent themes emerging from feedback collection included satisfaction, joy, emotional connection, belonging, and freedom of expression. These connect with the need for more in-depth research on the subjective experiences of the arts. While these associations are compelling, the preliminary nature of these pilots and the small sample size suggests the need for further research.

It is important to note how the process of piloting these methods revealed a number of overlapping, formal and informal ways of capturing data and generating insight into how people experienced the concert. Facilitators both engaged directly with participants and observed people interacting with the different feedback stations. By dedicating a portion of the venue to different types of feedback, the pilots provided an opportunity for reflection and interaction in which insights on accessibility could naturally emerge. Conversations sprouted between facilitators, staff, and attendees, which gave a clearer sense of how people were interpreting the feedback stations as well as how people were experiencing and finding particular types of value in the shows. Debriefing sessions amongst staff and facilitators at the end of the event generated further insight into the nature of feedback received and the process of conducting the pilot methods. By using this mix of methods, the team was able to directly and indirectly capture a variety of subjective (feelings, attitudes, perceptions) and qualitative (textual responses to open-ended questions from facilitators) data around people's experiences.

While the research team tried to tailor each method to an age group, there remained some difficulties getting the same level of engagement from different participants using different methods. Another emergent consideration involved a tension between anonymity and effective collection of manageable feedback. Anonymity was desirable in the sense of ethically using people's feedback for future research and writing, as well as being efficient in allowing people to engage more directly and simply with the feedback tools. However, this meant that there were times when it was unclear whether multiple responses were from the same participant or not, or whether a child or their caregiver had made the response.

Beyond the nature of facilitation and set-up, much of the feedback process is contingent on the audience make-up, the spatial lay-out of the venue, the energy of the crowd and individuals post-concert, positioning/availability of props and other items, and other variables. Especially for the group storyboard, the surface of the wall, table or floor utilized for the method can affect the ease of (a) affixing paper and (b) drawing/writing smoothly on the surface. The configuration of the venue has a variety of implications for how feedback stations can be used and set up, such as how many tables could be set up and how could they be positioned to ease the flow of people? While the spirit of the feedback methods is about moving towards participants engaging on their own terms, the reality is an entanglement between facilitators, staff, attendees, children, youth, caregivers, and the space/materials.

In many ways, the goal of promoting a greater sense of agency for the children and youth attending these concerts was fulfilled, with many young people engaging in the feedback methods in their own ways. This is exciting to build on going forwards. While during the pilots it seemed that the involvement of parents and caregivers could be undermining the agency of younger participants, analysis and reflection on the process suggested that we might leverage the closely entangled child-caregiver relationship to enhance the child's agency.

Limitations and recommendations

There remains a tension between engaging participants in an open-ended, flexible way and collecting relevant, comparable data for different age groups or types of disability. As discussed in this report, the focus here was on inclusive, adaptable methods that could suit as wide a range of participants as possible. While this is a strength for engagement, it does mean that generalisability for specific age-groups or types of disability is not possible.

Venue spaces often made it hard to ensure that the interview booth was accessible while providing sound isolation and privacy for children who may feel shy or anxious about giving feedback. There are also noticeable time constraints for these feedback methods relating to the context of the concerts. Facilitators agreed that it is noticeable how the energy of the crowd shifts quite quickly after the performance ends, with many attendees exiting the venue quickly. We acknowledge that especially for families with disabled members, outings and errands are especially time-consuming, and so additional commitments may be difficult to take on. Limitations such as parking access affect attendance and in turn feedback participation. Measures to mitigate these issues and improve response rates to feedback requests include further diversifying feedback methods, including allowing people to send in videos, images or text on their own time, or setting up dedicated feedback sessions or focus groups. Adding more detail on the feedback processes to the performance and venue guides could help people to plan it into their day.

The wide range of age groups as well as the differences in age groups across the events suggests that further piloting in different contexts is important. A core recommendation as such is the continued implementation and documentation of the suite of feedback methods. Another evaluation of the effectiveness of these methods should be conducted 6-12 months after continued use at Xenia events. A second core recommendation is to deepen the research on all past feedback and what this means for Xenia's work, which involves analysis of the pilot results as well as past written surveys. This full review of past feedback results could allow holistic integration of findings from audience feedback into Xenia Concerts' future programming, generating useful insights for adaptive concerts and arts organizations more broadly. Regardless of the feedback methods implemented, Xenia should continue promoting regular feedback and participation by audience members to foster a culture of inclusion and ensure that events meet the needs and interests of the communities Xenia serves.

The insights here are preliminary, intended to guide further piloting and development of methods for Xenia and other organizations seeking to expand their feedback gathering and audience engagements. It is important to note that additionally to different age groups, audience members at Xenia events have different types and severity of disabilities, and a range of neuro-cognitive functioning. As such, the methods were designed more to keep variety in mind rather than aiming to cater for a specific age group or type of disability. It is important to explore options for more anonymous feedback, and ensure access to anonymous complaints/feedback mechanisms. In line with the shift from listening to children to promoting their inclusion in decision making, future work should explore the possibility of co-creation and/or child-led research. Iteratively making steps to include children and youth more substantially over time is important for grounding and consolidating this work.

Relating to the contingencies explored above, it is recommended to keep the methods the same for each event, but maintain space for flexibility in (a) how the space is set up, and (b) how facilitation is conducted. For instance, different facilitation guides could be utilized for age ranges, or experiment with different levels of engagement with the child. A general theme of recommendation for enhancing the feedback collection process is taking the onus off the participant and easing their engagement as far as possible. Using a variety of methods requires numerous facilitators, and to maximize attendee participation, more facilitators would help.

Because the impacts of arts attendance and engagement change for people over time, offering chances for feedback for a longer period after the concert could bring new dimensions to the understanding of people's experiences. This could reveal measures to improve accessibility and concert offerings as well as the link between these concerts and people's wellbeing. Possibilities include distributing surveys, requesting audio/video submissions, and/or hosting dedicated focus groups or

interviews, all of which use elements of feedback methods discussed above. The fact that some families attend Xenia concerts regularly over time is an excellent opportunity to develop some longitudinal understanding of these dynamics and impacts on understanding of access/concerts/live events. Setting up a community advisory panel could allow for youth-driven perspectives to emerge and consolidate, and could include community participation planning to increase the use of cultural arts venues by disabled and neurodivergent children.

Below are some specific recommendations for the three pilot methods.

1. Card Sorting: There are different possibilities for tweaking the process for this to speed and ease the process for participants and facilitators. One is using a velcro strip on the sorting board for ease of attaching and removing cards. Another is to have larger panels with the questions where people can attach stickers or tokens indicating their preference. One further option is to replace the small image cards with larger posters for each accessibility feature, which people could attach coloured stickers indicating like/dislike/unsure.
2. Write and Draw group storyboard: Consider asking people to include their age beside or below their addition to identify trends among different age groups. It is important to make clear to participants that they may contribute to any or all of the poster sheets. It would be useful for facilitators and staff to reflect on what type of facilitation prompted the most meaningful interactions. This method is an especially good opportunity to explore the relationship between parents/caregivers and children/youth.
3. Interview booth: Children (and parents) who may feel shy about giving feedback in person could be offered the option to record their response audio-only or record at home and send it in. Facilitators should emphasize that there are no right or wrong answers. With clear consent from participants, these feedback sessions could be used to share audience perspectives on Xenia's social media accounts. It would be beneficial to set up a quiet corner where children can speak freely and be recorded without noise. Participants must have parental permission, so consent forms must be kept on hand for the parent and the child. Possibilities to increase engagement include making the interview station mobile so that the facilitator moves around the space and approaches people for interviews. This could make the interviews feel less staged and participants less "put-on-the-spot." There is potential for videos to be connected to a social media engagement plan: people could be asked to tag Xenia in stories on Instagram, simultaneously raising awareness about the concerts and promoting them as well as offering opportunities for exposure on Xenia's profile where desirable. While the first iterations of this method were time consuming, it might be possible to keep the interviews shorter by sticking to the core questions.

Finally, there are several other methods that came out of the literature review as well as reflection on these pilots. These might usefully be adapted for different contexts and demographics. Examples include

- Touch-based/ tactile responses for those with motor skill challenges, e.g. flannel boards
- Large print forms or devices for accessing large print surveys
- Handout/worksheet for kids to do during or after the concert? Kids could be incentivized to submit.
- Incentivize engagement with other methods - e.g. free shirt, stickers, fidget toy.

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