The Sing & Grow Program
young parents bonding with their children through music

The following article was inspired by a group of fifteen young mums in the community who were referred to a government-funded music therapy project called Sing & Grow. Sing & Grow is a national early intervention project which uses music as a means to help families with young children interact in positive ways that promote optimal child development. Families are referred by community organisations to Sing & Grow. Groups meet for an hour a week for ten weeks, where families participate in musical activities aimed at strengthening their relationships, empowering parents to increase parenting skills and promote child development, and encouraging social connections.

Sing & Grow sessions are designed and facilitated by qualified registered music therapists known as Session Leaders, and are held in community venues which are local to participating families. Between eight and ten families usually attend each group, and parents are encouraged to sit on the floor in a circle formation and participate with their children. The session is structured, yet allows for flexibility and usually consists of greeting and farewell songs, action and movement songs, instrument play, and other musical activities which promote cognitive and language development. Each session winds down with quiet time, in which physical touch, closeness and bonding between parent and child is encouraged.

Two young mothers from the aforementioned group were kind enough to share their reflections of their family’s participation in a Sing & Grow program. Their reflections have been used throughout the following article, to demonstrate real-life experiences of the ways that music and music therapy can be used to promote happy, healthy families.

Music surrounds us from before birth, and often plays an important role throughout life. Even people in the most advanced stages of dementia can benefit from music, as familiar songs retain a place in our memory right to the end of life. It is understandable then, that music can be a powerful and accessible tool for promoting well-being in a variety of ways.

Music therapy is an allied health profession practised throughout Australia and in more than 40 countries around the world. It is the planned and creative use of music to attain and maintain health and well-being, and may address physical, psychological, emotional, cognitive and social needs of individuals within a therapeutic relationship (Australian Music Therapy Association).

The use of music with families with young children can strengthen parent-child relationships, increase child development skills, and increase social support and connections (Abad & Edwards 2004, Abad & Williams 2007, Abad & Williams 2006, Lyons 2000, Nicholson, Berthelsen, Abad, Williams & Bradley 2008, Oldfield & Bunce 2001, Shoemark 1996). In the case of young parents (up to the age of 25 years) this is especially significant. Many young parents face numerous challenges. Research indicates that they are more likely to live in poverty, to have attained a lower level of education, to experience emotional stress and low self-esteem, and to have a lack of support when compared to older parents (Bradley, Cupples & Irvine 2002, Hockaday, Crase, Letourneau, Stewart & Barnfather 2004, Shelley & Stockdale 2000). As well as trying to negotiate the transition from childhood to adulthood, they have responsibility for the nurturing of another young life. These factors may lead to young parents needing extra support in providing positive parent-child interactions and promoting positive child developmental outcomes for their children (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg 1985, Letourneau, Stewart & Barnfather 2004, Sommer, Whitman, Borkowski, Gondoli, Burke, Maxwell & Weed, 2000).

All parents, but particularly young parents in particular, have a need for emotional and social support (Letourneau, Stewart & Barnfather 2004), as well as knowledge about parenting skills (Stiles 2005). They may need practical information about child development and how to facilitate this, or they may need support in building a positive relationship with their child. Sing & Grow offers one-on-one time where parents can try new ideas and activities with the guidance of a session leader, and where parents are encouraged to build on their existing strengths.

“...it’s been good to have some time where we actually have some quality interaction time, you know, when she enjoys it and I enjoy it.”

“[I’ve learnt] if you don’t actually do it with him, um he won’t pick it up as quick, like if you sing with him he will pick it up faster...”

Some young parents may not have experienced good parenting from their own parents, and may need to be shown positive ways to interact with their children. In Sing & Grow sessions, parents have the chance to observe some of the positive ways that other parents interact with their children.

“...its been really good to sorta just to watch the way other mums sorta interact with their children and sort of learn from them and go and talk to them afterwards.”

The development of a secure, positive relationship between a parent and child helps protect children in times of stress or adversity (Svanberg 1998). The use of music therapy with young parents and their infants can be an effective means for meeting the needs of families (Abad & Edwards 2004, Abad & Williams 2007, Abad & Williams 2006, Lyons

MUSJC. PLAY FOR LIFE

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by Lorna Sherwin and Lisa Freeman
2000. Nicholson et al. 2008, Oldfield & Bunce 2001, Shoemark 1996). During Sing & Grow sessions, the session leader models positive parenting behaviours, such as giving praise, modelling actions, and using hand-over-hand facilitation with the children. Though active participation, parents can increase their repertory of skills relating to their child, which can be transferred to the home.

One of the earliest and common forms of musical interaction between a mother and her child is the singing of lullabies (Baker & Makinlay 2005). A baby’s favourite voice is his or her mother’s (Lecanuet 1996), and it can boost a mother’s confidence when she knows she is calming her baby by using her voice. When parents come together for Sing & Grow, they often share stories of how they use music to calm their babies.

...I sing to her a lot more... I would always sing ‘You Are My Sunshine’ when she was upset... ever since she was really little, whenever she used to be upset, cause she had reflux, I used to sing that to her, and she’d calm down, she got used to that song.

This confidence can help the mother to relax, which in turn soothes her baby more (Oldfield & Bunce 2001). Music with a slow tempo (resting heart-rate), and gentle, predictable melodies can be sung or played while mothers engage in physical closeness with their children, for example, cuddles, rocking and positive face-to-face time (Baker & Makinlay 2007) Sing & Grow sessions usually conclude with “quiet time”, during which songs with prompts to encourage gentle touch are often used.

[she associates my singing with] hugging and being close to mum.

Music is identified as being a significant part of adolescent life (Sloboda & O’Neill 2002), and this significance can help make family interventions that use music less threatening for young parents. While engaging in music activities, parents can have the chance to enjoy spending time with their children, and to see them in a positive light (Oldfield & Bunce 2001). Parents often make comments about the time they spend with their children in Sing & Grow sessions.

...it’s been really exciting, I’ve actually enjoyed bringing Polly (name changed) along, she’s been really fun.

"It’s been good to have some time where we actually have some quality interaction time, you know, when she enjoys it and I enjoy it.”

Through using musical instruments such as small percussion, parents can rediscover the fun and spontaneity of being a child, and can share in this with their child (Oldfield and Bunce 2001). Families are offered the opportunity to play a range of small, colourful percussion instruments during Sing & Grow sessions, including bells, maracas, castanets, and hand drums.

“I’ve just liked interacting with the children in general. It’s more what I like doing. Yeah, I’d rather interact with the children than do something else like art and stuff by yourself. Yeah it helps you more with, interacting with your child more...”

Music is motivating for children, and through musical activities specific developmental skills can be targeted (Shoemark 1996). Fine motor skills can be developed through instrument play and actions to songs (Twinkle, Incy Wincy Spider) and gross motor skills can be developed through dancing (Hokey Pokey, If You’re Happy) (Davenson & Edwards 1998, Pellitteri 2000). In Sing & Grow sessions, specific motor skills can be promoted through careful choice of songs and activities.

...the fine movement and motor skills it’s helped a lot...He’s had an arm problem, where one side of him, can’t move his arm properly...it’s helped to even it out cause he’d had to grab with both hands and use both hands... instead of one. So he’s now moving the other hand more.

"In the “Three Little Fishies” song she’s only just started in the past week sorta throwing her hand up in the air to the aahhhhhchooo at the end, yeah, she throws her hands up the whole way through the song but you know, she’s trying to do the actions.”

Concepts can be learnt through songs (playing LOUD, playing soft) and group situations allow for the learning and practising of social skills, for example, listening to others, using eye contact, turn-taking, sharing, and initiation (Oldfield & Bunce 2001). Children’s social skills are promoted in Sing & Grow sessions in particular during the “hello song” and the “goodbye song” where eye contact, waving and verbalising are all modelled and encouraged.

...they sorta seem to recognize when their names are sung and things like that...”

“I think he’s learning more like different things to do. Like he’s learnt to wave, so he moves through the song, as people have been waving at him, and he’s picked it up that way. I think that’s how he’s picked it up. He’s copying what everyone else does.”

Language can be increased through repetition of simple songs, in which children can learn sounds and words. Songs with spaces for children to contribute, can be motivating for children who are just learning to verbalize (Pelliteri 2000). In Sing & Grow, songs such as Old Macdonald, with animal names and sounds are used to encourage vocalisation.

“When she’s getting tired and stuff, she always sorts done this but I think its gotten better, when she’s tired she sorts hums and tries to soothe herself, and when she’s happy she sorts vocalises with this sorta yelling and yeah”.

Coming together for a music group can be a non-threatening way for parents to increase their social networks, and increase their access to health professionals who can give them support (Lyons 2000). Organisations that host a Sing & Grow program often provide morning tea for families after their sessions. This has been observed to be a great way for parents to relax and get to know each other. Parents can talk afterwards about common parenting problems and build friendships, or they can approach staff from the venue where the group is held, such as a child health nurse, with concerns about their child. During Sing & Grow sessions, the session leader can help to foster a friendly environment for families.

"Because it was an actual playgroup beforehand anyway, its more like, some of the girls I have never spoken to I’ve spoken to now and yeah."

...its been really good to sorta just...go and talk to them afterwards.”

Music accompanies many of us on our journey through life. It is no wonder then that music can be an effective means to strengthen parent-child relationships, increase child development skills, and increase social support and connections. Young parents often need support in these areas, and Sing & Grow successfully uses music to meet these needs. Sing & Grow music therapy programs provide a supportive environment where families can learn new skills, both from the session leader and from each other.

Lorna Sherwin RMT is Queensland and Northern Territory Director, Sing & Grow, Playgroup Queensland. Lisa Freeman RMT is Queensland Senior Registered Music Therapist with Sing & Grow. Sing & Grow was established in July 2001 in partnership with Playgroup Queensland following a successful funding application submitted under the Department’s Child Abuse Prevention program. The project has been running continuously and successfully since this time in South-East Queensland, northern NSW and targeted regional areas of Queensland, expanding to cover all states and territories nationally in 2004. As well as direct service
delivery, the project has promoted and informed the community on the importance of appropriate stimulation and strong family relationships in early childhood and has built capacity in local communities to develop and continue with similar work themselves. It has also developed the Sing & Grow CD and booklet for the use of families and community groups and a resource book: Making Music Time a Success: A Guide for Using Music to Engage Families with Young Children for use by community workers. Sing & Grow programs are now run throughout Australia in collaboration with Playgroup Associations and community organisations, through the FaHCSIA Invest to Grow and REACH funding packages, until Jun 2009. For more information on Sing & Grow please contact: singandgrow@playgroupqld.com.au

References:

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