

Singing Ourselves: How to Offer Music to Children

by Kelly Matthews

Many child care programs have embraced technology when it comes to music, setting up listening centers as well giving children access to CD players and iPods. But in seeing children plugged into technology, often alone, I have to ask: When do children hear the voices of their caregivers singing? What benefits are children missing out on by passively listening to music rather than participating in creating it? And finally, how do these experiences influence children's relationships with song — as consumer or participant — and their relationship with us?

When Singing Became Real for Me

I have to admit, I didn't come from a musical family. Outside of "Happy Birthday," we didn't sing. And even "Happy Birthday" became a comedic, purposefully off-key silly thing — something not to be taken seriously or embraced in any real way. It was the thing you did before the cake happened, and better get it done quickly before the ice cream melted. Early in my early childhood career, I would dutifully put on the children's music CDs and cassettes and we would sing and dance along to Raffi and the other early childhood troubadours. This may be your experience too.

Then, in 2003, I met Tom Hunter. Tom liked nothing better than to listen to how children and teachers make sense of the world. He used singing and songs to explore how we learn, teach, celebrate, grieve, believe, play, and tell the stories of our lives. He had a gift for knowing the power of what happens when you sing the 'just right' song at the 'just right' time.

I met Tom at Teacher's Camp, more formally known as Northwest Teachers Conference (NWTC), which he co-founded in 1996 with Richard Scholtz. With its tagline "Professional Development and Personal Renewal for Educators Who Want to Think for Themselves," I was immediately

hooked. Part of the amazing culture of this place is the power of music and singing. I would sit on the floor at evening gatherings, singing along as best I could to songs I didn't know. Summer after summer, I would reserve a week to go to NWTC. Each year I would catch more words to songs. In the other 51 weeks of the year, I would pop some 'Tom Music' (as the children in my family child care program came to call it) into the CD player and we would sing along to the voice I loved so much.

Then Tom died. Up until that point, I hadn't been brave enough, confident enough to turn off the CD player. Of all the things Tom encouraged, this was always a big one: Use the CDs to learn the songs and then TURN THE THING OFF and just sing in your very own voice, the voice the children already know and love.

It wasn't until Tom died that I realized why I had to do this. In a way, he forced my hand. If I wouldn't sing to these children, who would? I wanted the children to know and love Tom the way I did — and many of them do. And I realized I also wanted them to know and love me in a whole new way. And through song, they do. But it wasn't just my own personal renewal and connection at stake.

The Impact of Orality and Song Supported Brain Development

For most of human history, our literacy development began with the ear as much as the mouth and eye; listening to other humans speak, sing, and chant was the focus, not looking at letters and text. This practice of orality — tuning our ears to the spoken or sung linguistic patterns, inflections, and content of our home language — deeply influences our language development. Think about how the rhythm, tone, and pattern of nursery rhymes and other songs we chant or sing fit into that practice of orality. Without having that *experiential* learning of hearing rich, full oral language and song, the whole text-based literacy piece can be much more difficult. Bev Bos puts it this way: "As educators like Barry Sanders, author of *A is for Ox*, reminds us — 'Orality has got to come before literacy.' I love the way he



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describes it — ‘literacy fits over orality like a glove’ and orality thus serves as a necessary and powerful foundation for the construction we call literacy. Children need to hear language in order to learn language.”

Neuroscience is on our side. Dr. Adele Diamond, Canada Research Chair in Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of British Columbia, discusses the executive brain functions that are supported and developed in creative play, including creative word play: inhibitory control, working memory, cognitive flexibility. These three skills are supported in the practice of singing with children, especially when the educator ‘makes room’ in the songs for children’s ideas and input, for example:

- *Inhibitory control* is when we are able to stay on task, like singing “Old MacDonald,” and not be distracted. It is when we sing this song we are singing, instead of bursting into “Twinkle Twinkle,” even though we may want to sing that one more. It is also the piece that we practice when we ask children to add a piece to the song, like the animal. They have lots of choices they could make, many of which might have nothing to do with a farm. But choosing a phrase that fits the context of the current song can show that control.
- *Working memory* is supported through actively singing with children when we are able to hold the refrain in our heads, even while singing the verse. Or for songs that have an accumulative quality to them, like “Going on a Bear Hunt,” where items or phrases get added and repeated; we practice working memory there, too.
- Finally, *cognitive flexibility* is reinforced with personalized singing with children when we sing songs with wide open spaces for children to ‘enter in’ their own details — as we sing those songs, children are invited to use their creativity, twisting and turning through the song, switching perspectives, and using language spontaneously and creatively. For an example of this kind of song, listen to “Baby Chant” (which also has those accumulative qualities), or “We’ve Been Waiting for You,” another ‘enter in’ song (Hunter, 2003).

But not all singing is created equal. In her article “Singing to children may help development of language skills,” Hill (2011) quotes Sally Goddard Blythe, the director of the Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology, when she writes,

“Song is a special type of speech. Lullabies, songs and rhymes of every culture carry the ‘signature’ melodies and inflections of a mother tongue, preparing a child’s ear, voice and brain for language. . . . Neuro-imaging has shown that music involves more than just centralised hotspots in the

brain, occupying large swathes on both sides [and that] children’s response to live music is different from recorded music. . . . Babies are particularly responsive when the music comes directly from the parent. Singing along with a parent is for the development of reciprocal communication.”

I can only see additional benefits if children are hearing these songs from their caregivers, as well as parents.

Memory Making

But it isn’t just brain development going on. During a workshop exploring how early educators can help children know that they belong, a participant requested an example of what Billie Ognenoff, the presenter and family child care provider, did at nap time to gently lull the children to sleep. Billie closed her eyes and sang a lovely wisp of a lullaby in front of hundreds of other adults. Many of us might be terrified at the thought of doing such a thing, but this early educator wouldn’t call herself brave. Or even talented, necessarily. But she absolutely knows the power of a song. Billie wasn’t singing to show off her voice or to teach a concept. Performance was the last thing on her mind. What she was modeling was authentic singing as a form of participation, of memory-making with children. The song she sang at this workshop was the song she sang to the children who requested it as they drifted off to sleep in her child care program. This and other lullabies became the language of ‘being known full well’ in Billie’s program. These are songs that become embedded in the dreams and being of the children in that program.

Being with Children Authentically; Creating Together, Not Just Consuming Entertainment

Part of what we want for children in our care are authentic experiences. We want children to find their voices and know the stories of their own lives. When we listen to or sing songs on CDs we are only learning other people’s stories. When we sing with our own voices, we can vary the tempo to reflect the mood, we can modulate the volume throughout the song at our own choosing, and most importantly, we can make as much room as we need for the children’s stories.

As Bev Bos puts it, “CDs don’t stop when a kid wants to say something or add something to the song — they just keep blazing right along.” If a song is resonating with a group of children, they may have seven verses to add. Do these additional stories matter? Do we really want to sacrifice those children’s stories, their ‘being known full well’ because the CD says to keep moving? As storyteller Michael Meade reminds us,

“Young people need authentic experiences. We are authentic when we’re living the story we came here to live. This is true of everybody, but with young people it is critical, especially in our substitute, technological materialist culture” (as cited in Malkin, 2011, p. 12).

I would add, we are authentic when we sing the song we came here to sing.

The Power of Having a Song When You Need It

Meade (2011) shares the story of the ‘threshold choirs,’ small groups of elders who sing at the bedsides of people in hospice care. This moving example shows us the power of song to help us mark those moments of deep transition. Moments of deep transition happen in the early education world as well. Children who have grown up in programs move on or leave us for a variety of reasons, and songs can be a way we mark those meaningful moments.

A song that had special meaning to me, “Red River Valley,” was one we sang often through the days and weeks. Like any good folk song, the lyrics might depend a bit on who you learned it from, but the song’s themes of separation, relationship, and memory spoke both to me and the children. This song became especially poignant on the last day of school for a child who had grown up in our program, starting as an 8-week-old infant and leaving as a 4½ year old. The other children didn’t have to search for their message of goodbye; it was already embedded deep within them. The song was already a part of them and they were able to offer it to someone who might need it, same as the small choirs above. We two groups – the threshold choirs and this group of children – were marking different passages of time closing, but the deep need to mark them as important was the same.

Keeping the Language Alive

Those of you lucky enough to have those seeds of songs tucked away, hang on to them. Sow them wherever you go. Sing while you work and play. Loris Malaguzzi marks “a hundred joys for singing and understanding a hundred worlds to discover a hundred worlds to invent” in his poem, “The Hundred Languages of Children” (Edwards, p. 2).

Singing is one of the languages of our humanity. As Meade says,

We want children to find their voices and know the stories of their own lives.

“As the older generation of singers dies out, a new generation takes it place. There is not supposed to be an end to it. The music has to be re-created through the living bodies and souls. It’s up to those who are alive right now to find their gifts

and allow them to come out. And we have to do it in the face of a mass culture that wants to obliterate uniqueness in favor of bland sameness” (as cited in Malkin, 2011, p. 9).

When Tom died, I realized something life-changing: It’s gotta be me. If these songs that I love are going to be sung, if new people are going to learn these songs and be moved the way I was, if children are going to curl up under blankets and drift off to sleep with these songs in their ears, then I have no choice but to sing. This was a scary moment. It was a passing of the torch, a moment to choose. So turn off the CD player and the iPod, and let the children hear the voices of our humanity, the voices of love.

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