Liam's story:
The musical journey of a young boy

by Lynne Anderson

The recent media interest in getting children involved in music has prompted me to reflect on the musical development of a young boy in my extended family. This commentary is offered from the perspective of a music educator in the early childhood sector. Liam is my god-daughter's son, affectionately known as my 'great god-son', because I happen to think he is just great.

I contend that Liam's development does not align with Piaget's view of the child as a "lone scientist who works as a solitary agent" (Ebbeck, 1996, in Barrett, 2003, p. 67), but with socio-cultural theories which see the child as one who "learns through a socially mediated process that is supported by adults and more expert others" (Rogoff, 1993, in Barrett, 2003, p. 67). Campbell (2000) also argues that "although children are musical without expert guidance, they become more so as a result of it" (p. 37).

I strongly believe that the encouragement of significant others, musical or not, in children's musical endeavours greatly enhances their development in music. In my view it is not the musical ability of parents that makes the difference but the high level of support that children are given. Young (2003), for example, claims that children's sense of themselves as musical is already being formed through their interaction with adults; that children who see adults being actively musical will begin to absorb and imitate this active engagement in musical exploration. Music provides opportunities for children and families to interact, develop understanding of their heritage, and enjoy shared experiences. Music has been a powerful thread that has woven many families and children together and provided them with a special identity (Isbell & Raines, 2003). It is within such an environment that Liam is immersed, surrounded by his whānau who on any given occasion have music as an integral part of the gathering.

Research interwoven in the story

Researchers have discovered that music development occurs before birth. Zoltan Kodály, a Hungarian ethnomusicologist and educator, believed that music education of the young child should start nine months before the birth of the young child's mother (Meier, 2003, in Greata, 2006). In this story that person is Mary, my best friend since our school days. Although it could be said that Mary was not naturally musical, she was an enthusiastic member of the college choir and took part in school performances and local operatic society productions with me. Mary has supported my musical journey for over 40 years and continues this today along with the extended whānau. Mary and husband John made sure that their daughter Jac, Liam's mother, was given every opportunity to learn the piano, flute and guitar - interests which have endured.

Hearing is the first of the senses to be developed in the foetus, and unborn babies as young as 16 weeks will respond to music (Young, 2003). Babies are not only able to hear, and are listening in to music before birth, but they also remember and recognise this music after birth (Glover & Young, 1998; Young, 2003). Liam's mother sang to him throughout her pregnancy because she believed that as a neonate Liam would relax the moment he heard
those songs. She reported that the child responded quite differently to these songs than to other music he was to later hear. Interestingly, Jac also told me that Liam’s father, Damen, used to read stories to him before birth and the response to dad’s voice was the same each time, marked by rigorous kicking throughout the story.

Unlike many, Liam’s parents were very happy for him to explore the piano which he loved to do. His exploration included high and low notes, loud and quiet dynamics with individual fingers as opposed to the traditional ‘crashing’ with the hands on as many keys as possible.

The musical cultures children encounter in various contexts provide rich opportunities for the exploration of their own musical capacities and the development of skills and understandings in a range of musical practices (Barrett, 2003). At two and a half years old Liam had already experienced a wedding and two funerals. The music played and sung at these gatherings is still recalled by Liam long after these events.

Music with infants and toddlers is all about understanding how simple it all is. It needs no special CDs or TV programmes or equipment or sessions lead by those with formal training. Most importantly infants and toddlers will make music with those who are close and familiar to them as part of affectionate, everyday, playful activity (Young, 2003).

Sometimes with Liam his schema changed from experiencing the guitar to that of experiencing the guitar case itself, opening and shutting it, with all the commentary when doing this. He appreciated the softness of the lining, climbing in and sitting down comfortably before reversing the process in actions and language.

Tarnowski (1999) contends that musical play (being an intrinsically motivating activity that is pleasurable to the participant) should be that in which the goal is engagement in a process rather than achieving a product. This claim is supported by Young (2006) who suggests that typically in relation to singing, early childhood music education tends to focus on children learning to perform a range of children’s songs which does little to encourage children’s self-initiated musical activity. Likewise, Willingham (2002) suggests that while we might lay claim to creativity as being one of the cornerstones of our musical endeavours, we are strongly rooted in the performance tradition. This results in the virtual absence of creative problem solving processes in music education teaching and learning processes. Hansen, Bernstorff and Stubber (2004) hold the view that “what may appear to be play [when children laugh, sing and move] is in reality an active, engaging, and authentic learning experience” (p. 16). They maintain that it is logical that if the purpose of education is to learn, then play and musical play, in particular, supports this goal.

Whilst singing has always been a cornerstone of our whānau gatherings, Liam has frequently organised an orchestra for the whānau, distributing the instruments, conducting us with his baton, and ensuring that we heed changes in tempo and volume according to his conducting.

Kenney (2004) talks about the affirmation we give children as visual artists. Children’s art work is displayed on the wall in early childhood centres and in photographic documentation in portfolios. The art work is displayed on refrigerators at home and sent to adoring grandparents for proud exhibiting. The young child is a budding artist, whose efforts are praised...
and encouraged. This raises the issues of how we nurture children as composers or musicians. From my perspective there tends to be little interest in, or support for, children’s spontaneous musical behaviours.

Liam is affirmed for his ‘musiking’. His family enthusiastically supports his sound exploration and frequently become involved in the experience, as evidenced by this photo of Liam and his dad enjoying a jam session together.

It is most important in the early years to foster a positive disposition as an active music maker: to sing, to play instruments, and to move. If spontaneous efforts and activity are largely ignored, or at worst curtailed because they are noisy, or if the prevailing attitude is ‘boys don’t sing’, then both conscious and subconscious effects of these messages are likely to negate the sense of self as musical. Once absorbed, such negative dispositions are very resilient (Young, 2003). Kenney (2004) declares that:

Our knowledge of early childhood tells us that the early years are the most important for developing the foundation upon which all other learning will take place. Thinking of music in terms of basic concepts rather than specific skills will guide how we build curricula so that we can provide a broad music foundation for little children. (p. 5)

Young children need to experience the concepts of pitch, duration, form, dynamics and timbre. Music environments carefully prepared and facilitated by the teacher are one of the most effective ways to provide this foundation. The understanding and labelling of these elements, as well as specific skill development, will likely occur later. A supportive early home environment from the outset that encourages spontaneous expressive-

ness is important for optimising musical achievement. Rogoff (1990) suggests that the best learning is situated within a social context.

Laevers (1996, in Niland, 2007) recognises engagement as being an essential ingredient of quality early childhood curriculum. His research demonstrates that when children are engaged in experiences they demonstrate high levels of focus, intense mental activity, and creativity. This view is supported by Young (2003) and Kenny (2004) who maintain that children learn by interacting with their environment. They construct their own knowledge by trying to make sense out of whatever is around them, and they develop skills by manipulating what they find interesting.

This engagement with the environment was enacted by Liam at a wedding. I was fascinated by his response to the live music at two and a half years of age (see photograph below). He was captivated by the trio and stood quite still, watched and listened to...
the instruments for some considerable time. Now when he sees them in other contexts he says "we heard the double bass/saxophone/ guitar at the wedding, didn't well"

Wolf (2001, in Hansen et al., 2004) asserts that the use of music – in particular rhythm and rhyme - enhances memory. She suggests that when music is used together with movement such as finger plays or singing games, this educational strategy creates an "extra sensory input to the brain and probably enhances the learning" (p. 28). Children often sing or chant words that they have created "to help them replay previously learned information" (Hansen et al., 2004, p. 28) or simply for the joy of using language in music.

One of Liam's favourite songs from his extensive repertoire is 'Morning Town Ride' when he insists that 'his verse' be sung; "Pa at the engine, Gram rings the bell, Liam swings the lantern to show that all is well!" He demonstrates the joy of word play as he sings 'Away in a manger no crib for a bed, so little Lord Jesus had to sleep in a hedge', and then he dissolves into great laughter at his joke. It is vital to understand and believe in the value of play in and through music in order to support learning and language in young children.

**Concluding thoughts**

Research into the value of music is comparatively new (McPherson, 2006). However, preliminary studies into the influence of music on brain development (Rauscher, et al., 1997) show the positive impact of music on other curriculum subjects (Kelstrom, 1998), and the emotional connection to music (Veilickaite-Katiniene, 1997) would suggest that it should be given more recognition. Music may even be regarded as an unnecessary frill "that gets in the way of what is deemed to be the more serious subjects" (Plummeridge, 1991, p. 7).

With so much to gain and nothing to lose, it is vital that all children should not only experience music but also be actively encouraged by significant others to sing, listen, play, move, and create:

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As educators of young children, we have an opportunity to support budding young composers by providing an environment that nurtures their natural sound exploration. If we can think of these little ones as composers and can tolerate the creative fallout (noise), we might support the development of a generation of composers (Kenney, 2007, p. 2).

As Cohen (2002) says:

...if we curb the urge to teach; don't interfere if there is no need; unless there are signs to the contrary, assume that [the child] is doing something that is worthwhile for him or her; treat the [child's] work with respect; if we feel impatient, work on our own impatience and walk away ... (p. 223)

then we will be giving children the very best start to their lives.

Liam's musical development is testimony to the unconditional support and encouragement, rather than formal teaching, given to him by significant adults in his extended family.

**References**


