**Building a Caring Community of Learners Through Music**

“...early relationships are viewed as both the foundation and the scaffold on which cognitive, linguistic, emotional, social, and moral development unfold.” (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p349)

Brain research tells us that overall neurological development, the “cornerstone” of all other aspects of development, thrives when parents and caregivers nurture healthy relationships (Nagel, 2012, p157). Positive relationships not only support self awareness, social competence, secure attachment, temperament, empathy, conscience and behaviour but also support a strong beginning at school and overall academic achievement. They are as important to school success as a child’s IQ.

*From Neurons to Neighbourhoods* identify the following features that positive relationships require:

* Reliable support to build confidence and trust
* Responsiveness to build a sense of agency and self efficacy
* Protection from harm and unforeseen threats
* Affection to build self esteem
* Opportunities to experience and resolve conflict co-operatively
* The scaffolding of new skills and capacities
* Reciprocal interaction, and
* Mutual respect (as cited in Nagel, 2012)

What do such programs look like in practice and what is the role of traditional aspects of kindergarten curriculum, such as music sessions, in fostering positive relationships?

At Ballymore Kindergarten, the philosophical underpinnings and all intentional teaching decisions are based on a framework for understanding relationships in a group setting. The framework, ***Creating a Caring Community of Learners***, supports staff by guiding reflection on six elements which are the foundation for the curriculum. The six elements are:

1. **Respect and empathy** – acknowledging children’s feelings and experiences as the starting point for intentional teaching.
2. **A supportive base** (focus on calm) - how the physical, social, emotional and psychological environment supports children to face challenges in the group setting and beyond.
3. **Expectations and self regulation** - helping children to recognise, understand and manage emotions, behaviour, thinking.
4. **A sense of agency** – a “strengths based” view of young children, using play to give children a sense of worth and competence and to develop respect for themselves and others.
5. **Problem solving** - in all areas of the curriculum, enhancing emotional and social wellbeing by empowering children.
6. **Communication** (talking and listening) - considering the complexities of communication to help children develop a consciousness of others and to be respectful communicators.

Group sessions, whether for discussions, story or music, are an essential part of this curriculum. Group sessions are valuable for developing a sense of belonging, for building a consciousness of, and connection to others, for experiencing shared sustained thinking, and for providing opportunities to practise emotional and social skills (eg listening, turn taking, sharing humour, self regulation), and executive functioning skills (working memory, inhibitory control and cognitive flexibility) as well as to observe adults as they approach a range of social situations in a positive way.

As a group session, music also has the potential to calm, connect, challenge, delight, validate and change – with significant impacts on a young child’s development and learning. To be effective, music sessions need not be long or overly stimulating. Nor need they be delivered by a trained musician. Some of the most powerful musical moments often involve simple songs which can be shared at anytime and anywhere. Such songs are not only easy to use whenever needed, but when we rely on our own singing, rather than a CD or ipod, then songs can be easily adapted - to sing fast, slow, with new words the children suggest, with changes to actions.

How do such music experiences support the six elements of our relationships framework? Here are some examples:

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| **Element of Relationships Framework** | **Musical experience** | **Connections** |
| Respect & empathy | Hello songs  Humpty Dumpty transition | Acknowledging group members  Naming other children |
| Supportive base | My Pigeon House  Warm kitty, soft kitty | Calming songs |
| Expectations & self regulation | Freeze games  BINGO  Down by the banks of the hanky pank | Songs that require inhibitory control |
| Agency | Stir up the pudding oh  I’ve got this clapping feeling  Seven Steps  Criss cross  Well there was Jaws | Songs that incorporate children’s ideas  Songs that elicit a response from others eg surprise, delight |
| Problem solving | Snail snail  Grey ponies  Hi my name is Joe | Songs that encourage thinking – eg how to work together, how to put actions to a song |
| Communication | Bee Bee  Willaby Wallaby Woo  Do you know the muffin man?  When I was one  If you’re happy and you know it... | Songs that focus on listening, rhyming, consciousness of others, reading emotions. |

Sharing music with young children can offer some of the most satisfying and collaborative teaching experiences. Music holds a unique place in supporting positive relationships in early childhood settings.

References:

* Nagel, M.C. (2012). *In the Beginning: The brain, early development and learning.* Camberwell, Aust: ACER Press.
* Shonkoff. J.P. & Phillips, D.A. (2000). *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods: The science of early childhood development.* Washington DC: National Academy Press