

Music and Health Article – Web Child

It goes without saying that children love music. Infants jiggle to music, preschoolers sing effortlessly along to the radio, primary school children make up dances to their favourite songs and teenagers idolise pop singers. The good news is that not only is music fun for your children, but it is healthy too. With one quarter of all Australian school aged children being overweight or obese and almost the same amount of children and young people suffering mental health problems, never has our children's health been more important.

"With brains wired for song, we derive pleasure, feel less pain and transcend our body's limits." Anon

We sing lullabies babies to put them to sleep because music has a proven soothing effect. Calm music stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, enabling endorphins to be released. These endorphins facilitate relaxation, in the same way as Valium and other similar medications. Endorphins stimulated by music can also trigger happiness, excitement or bliss.

Music has the potential to improve physical well-being. In a music therapy study conducted in 2008 live music had both a positive physical and psychological effect when played to long term hospitalised children. Similarly music therapy utilised in paediatric hospitals in 2007 was found to increase the mental well being of the child patients. Kindergarten aged children were found to have better quality and duration of sleep when they had music played to them during naptime.

Emerging research suggests that rhythmic music may change brain function. This has implications for treating neurological conditions, including attention deficit disorder (ADD) and depression. ADD diagnosed in primary and early high school aged boys was treated with rhythmic light and sound stimulation. The clinical psychology study found that the stimuli sped up brainwaves, resulting in increased concentration. Over the course of the treatment the children's collective concentration span increased, IQ performance was improved and there was a reduction in behavioural problems. While research is still developing, the role that music could play in conjunction with or as a replacement for medication could be significant.

"It's unclear why humans are so uniquely sensitive to music – certainly music shares many features with spoken language and our brains are developed to process the rapid tones and segments of sound that are common to both."

Dr. Oliver Sacks

The physical impact of music is still being researched, however the cognitive improvements associated with music and children is evident. Many studies have found a significant correlation between music and non-musical domains such as linguistics, mathematics and spatial abilities. Children who were involved in extra curricular music activities had significantly better verbal and vocabulary results than their non-musical peers. These results were consistent across culture and age.

In cultural context music assists children to understand their heritage. Be it a nursery rhyme or a dream time story, music is utilised to engage learners. Music has often been associated with stories as music assists memory mnemonically. It is likely that you learnt the alphabet by singing the alphabet song. This early interactive behaviour – singing songs with parents, grandparents and friends - promotes positive relationships and reinforces emotional development.

Music takes children and adults alike on a journey through their imagination. We are encouraged by lyrics and sounds to enter into the magical world which allows us to reflect and become more self-aware. Social skills and confidence are improved in children

"We teach music to children because it is good and because of its immeasurable capacity and potency to act of the heart, mind, spirit and soul of humanity... We teach music to children because through it we can learn many skills associated with social inclusion and social interaction."

Richard Gill, musical director for the Victorian Opera and music educator

"The Australian Girls Choir helped her (Karnee) to develop as a confident young lady who can successfully conquer a variety of tasks and situations. She has learnt the value of practise and being prepared to take on a challenge."

Dixie Brown

"My daughter has just completed Year 12 and achieved an E.N.T.E.R. of 97.8% - much of what she has managed is due to the self-discipline and confidence your choir has instilled in her. Even if my daughter could not sing a note after thirteen years of training, membership of the choir is the best 'investment' we could have made in her happiness and her future."

Mr Sharpe

Richard Gill is correct and his views are validated by Ms Brown and Mr Sharpe (parents of Australian Girls Choir choristers), musicians have many of the life skills needed to excel. Music students learn early in their lessons that excellence can be achieved through hard work. Music must be committed to memory and time must be put aside to attend rehearsals. It is only through practise and diligence that successful performances are achieved. Teamwork skills and discipline are necessary for both musicians and in the workforce, particularly in a choir where all singers must work in partnership towards their single goal – a harmonious and successful performance.

In research undertaken by Dr Maria Sandgren of the University of Stockholm, Sweden it was found that choral singing had a strong positive effect on choristers. Results indicated that with participation in choral programs there was a significant increase in positive emotions while negative emotions subsided. She particularly noted that "I found that choral singers, particularly women, are happier, more alert and relaxed after rehearsal". Most importantly children who perform music must conquer fear and take risks. Risk taking highlights how much we are capable of and helps us fulfil our potential. A child who performs must learn to manage a little anxiety, good practice for the natural anxiety and stress that they will have to deal with in their adult life.

"The power of music to integrate and cure. . . is quite fundamental. It is the profoundest nonchemical medication."

Dr. Oliver Sacks

Music is healthy. It makes you dance, jump and move around – increasing your heart rate and loosening your limbs. Emotional and social development are clearly observed, imagination is stimulated and cognitive function improved. Involving your child in music is an easy way for you to improve your child's health, and one healthy thing they will enjoy!

"Music is more potent instrument than any other in education." **Plato**

Written by Margie Dimech

The Australian Girls Choir celebrates 25 years of providing high quality education and wonderful performance opportunities to many thousands of girls from across the country. Girls aged five to eighteen years are trained in song, dance and drama on a weekly basis in Adelaide, Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney. Their reputation as Australia's most dynamic girls' choir has been established in hundreds of high profile performances at home and abroad. www.aspagroup.com.au