



THANK YOU FOR THE MUSIC

UQ research has revealed that informal encounters with music at home are critical for young children’s development – with benefits above and beyond those of shared reading.

Think back to your earliest childhood memory of music. Perhaps you recall a lullaby cooed before sleep, a nursery rhyme sung with glee, or an instrument played with youthful abandon?

Whether you spent disciplined childhood music lessons learning scales and notation or drummed away on pots and pans, your early musical experiences were a vital part of your cognitive and social development.

A recent study from The University of Queensland (UQ) shows that informal encounters with music at home are critical for young children’s development – with benefits above and beyond those of shared reading. And quite beautifully, the best results are seen when music making is a shared experience between parent and child.

Professor Margaret Barrett, Head of UQ’s School of Music, has spent nearly two decades working alongside Australian families to research music learning and development. Her extensive research has been funded by grants from the Australian Research Council (ARC), the Australia Council for the Arts, the British Council, and a number of commissioning bodies.

“One of my first major research projects investigated creativity and invented notation, and working with kindergarten-aged children as they composed their own music using classroom instruments and voice,” Professor Barrett says.

“I was fascinated to find that every child was able to notate what they did using their own form of notation. What was even more

fascinating was that every child, when asked to sing one of their own songs, happily complied.”

After finding that young children were capable of invented notation, Professor Barrett wanted to find out more about how and why young children invent songs. This led to her second ARC study investigating the invented song-making of children aged between 18 months and four years, and the function of this in children’s life and learning.

“The investigation focused on music making within families, including the children’s invented songs, and the ways families used this music-making. Invented song is independent song-making that seems to emerge at around 18 months, as children become more independent and mobile, and as language is falling into place,” Professor Barrett says.

“Families were co-researchers, collecting song and music-making on video. Those video diaries gave a real insight into how children between 18 months and four years of age use song as part of their identity work, as part of their way of describing their world, as a means of comfort and solace – invented song is linked to all these powerful things.”

In 2013, building upon her previous studies, Professor Barrett invited Professor Graham Welch, Honorary Professor at UQ and Established Chair of Music Education at the University College London’s Institute of Education, to join her team to launch their most recent study on being and becoming musical.

“For this longitudinal study, we were interested in the lived experience of music for Australian children, and we wanted to track how this aided in their early development,” Professor Barrett says.

The study involved families from four strands. The first strand included ‘ordinary’ Australian families who have an interest in music, but whose children do not participate in formal music lessons. These families were given video cameras and were asked to keep weekly video diaries to track what informal music making happened in the home.

The second strand involved families who had enrolled their children in music early-learning programs. Again, these families were given video cameras and were asked to keep weekly video diaries to track what informal music making happened in the home.

The third strand drew on data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian children (LSAC), a cohort study that tracks development across a range of spectra.

The final strand investigated music provision in childcare and the facilitators and constraints on such provision.

“The analysis of the LSAC survey data, led by research team member Dr Kate Williams, investigated the relationship between the frequency of shared music-making in the home and children’s long-term learning outcomes,” Professor Barrett says.

“Findings drawn from data from over 3100 parents indicate that shared music-making at the age of 2–3 years correlates positively with increased school readiness, pro-social skills, and literacy and numeracy outcomes at age 4–5.

“The results showed benefits over and above shared reading.”

“We found informal music-making to be a powerful tool for early social, emotional and cognitive development. Many of the invented songs also had movements attached, which also helped to develop gross and fine motor movements.

“Songs are a fantastic way of learning about the world. We learn our body parts, we learn numbers, we learn the order of the alphabet, we learn that wheels go round, and we learn colours – it’s an incredible didactic tool.”

Many parents involved in the study had little to no formal music background, but were able to participate through the use of music multimedia, improvised instrument making, and informal song writing.

“In one family, the father was a self-taught guitarist who couldn’t read a bar of music, but wrote simple little songs to play to his baby son – songs about building blocks, toys and events in their daily life.

“Other parents made up songs with their children as they participated in daily routines such as dressing, bathing and eating.

“This shows that you don’t have to be musically trained to be able to engage really meaningfully with your child through music.”

There is a growing body of evidence around the contributions of music in young children’s lives, with the benefits of shared music making extending beyond the social, emotional and cognitive development alone. Professor Barrett’s research extends to the emerging area of musical parenting, in which music is a tool to help parents communicate and bond with their children.

“Music making in the family is more than just learning music; it’s about bonding. Songs can help children do things that they may not necessarily like, and by using a song and turning it into a game, the difficult things can be worked through. In this way, musical parenting is about using music as a tool to foster stronger family relationships.”

This innovative research on the role of music in early development helped inform the creation of a radio station devoted to broadcasts for and about children. Kinderling Kids Radio, an independent Sydney-based radio station, has drawn on Professor Barrett’s findings to help structure a series of family-friendly programs for children aged 0–7.

Evan Kaldor, Managing Director of The Parent Brand and Founder of Kinderling Kids Radio, says that Margaret’s expert knowledge and

support has been integral to the success of the station.

“Music lies at the heart of what we do at Kinderling and over the last two years Margaret’s advice and support has been invaluable,” says Mr Kaldor.

“She has supported the development of Kinderling’s exciting new early learning pre-school program, Play & Learn, which uses sound and music to foster creativity, improve wellbeing, enhance communication skills and give children the confidence to build meaningful connections – all key outcomes set out in the Early Years Learning Framework.

“Margaret has helped us to evaluate and reassert auditory activities and music as an equally integral component of the overall learning model for young children. We’re extremely thankful to have Margaret involved.”

Given the significant impact that musical engagement has on young children, Professor Barrett is now working with childcare centres to develop music-based lesson plans for childcare educators.

Aside from the obvious benefits these findings offer to proactive parents and carers, her vision is to see this work further developed and translated into policy reform and enhanced training around how music is used and taught in formal early childhood settings.

“Quality music education should be available to children in childcare, and that hinges in part on childcare educators feeling competent and confident,” Professor Barrett says.

“We need to put professional learning around childcare educators in order to develop their competency and confidence in using music in their daily practice.”

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(Images: jlcjd4v3, 641200546, 610049274, Marius Masalar; words: Rachel Westbury)

Story last updated 11 December 2017.

Highlights to date:

2001–2003: Professor Barrett receives an ARC Large Grant to investigate children’s invented notation and its role in children’s musical thinking

2005–2007: Professor Barrett receives an ARC Discovery grant to investigate the role of invented song-making in young children’s learning and development

2009–2011: Following her initial study, Professor Barrett receives an ARC Discovery Project grant for a study on the pedagogy of creative thought and practice in music.

2013: Professor Barrett launches the ‘Being and becoming musical’ study to investigate the benefits an informal music education can have on the development of young children.

2014: Professor Barrett begins work with parents as part of the study.

2015: Professor Barrett moves on to work in childcare centres as part of the study, and delivers a keynote address in April 2015 reporting some of the findings to the international conference on research in music education Exeter, U.K. The Inaugural Music Trust Award for Research reporting the benefits of music is awarded to the project in November 2015 for a paper reporting the LSAC strand. Professor Barrett also commences work with Kinderling radio, advising the development of their programming and content using the study’s findings.

2016: The research team publishes the LSAC strand analysis reporting social, emotional and cognitive outcomes in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*.

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