

SING & GROW

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Sing & Grow is an early intervention music therapy program for at risk families with children aged three years or younger

Sing & Grow is a prevention and early intervention music therapy program that has been provided by Playgroup Queensland since July 2001. It is currently funded by the Australian Government until 2007. The project is based in Brisbane and provides services across South-East Queensland as well as some regional areas. The project is managed and presented by tertiary trained and qualified Registered Music Therapists.

Families with children aged three years or younger are referred to programs by local community organisations and other service providers with whom collaborative partnerships have been established. Many families with identified risk factors participate in programs including: adolescent parents, families with disabilities, parents with mental health challenges (including substance abuse), families identified as low socio-economic status or socially isolated, non-English speaking families, Indigenous families, and families experiencing, or at-risk of, domestic violence or child abuse and neglect.

Program accessibility is enhanced by the selection of local community settings within a ten-minute drive of participating families' homes (for example, community centres, play groups, church halls). Venues are selected that are close to public transport, and in some cases partner organisations have been engaged to pick up families who do not have access to a car.

Registered Music Therapists provide a group music therapy program over ten weeks to families with the aim of improving child development outcomes, enhancing parent-child interactions, empowering parents to develop their parenting skills, and promoting and supporting social support networks for families. Strategies used include the positive modelling of interaction skills (for example, taking turns to use instruments to teach sharing), the provision of an at-home resource for families to use (such as the *Sing & Grow* take-home CD and companion booklet), and the ongoing development of exit strategies for families to ensure that further support is provided as required (for example, through playgroups, community networking).

A maximum of ten families participate in each group and each session is approximately one hour in length. Each session begins with a "hello song" and ends with a "good-bye song". During the session children and parents take part in action songs, instrumental play, dancing, and quiet time with relaxation music.

The *Sing & Grow* program uses music therapy to enhance child development directly – for example, action songs and dance to develop fine and gross motor skills, singing to develop language skills. However, every

aspect of the program is also designed to model to parents how they can facilitate their child's development through music (for example, quiet time with relaxation music to facilitate bonding and closeness between parents and children). Families are provided with a free copy of the *Sing & Grow* CD and companion booklet that are designed to reinforce the program goals. The CD and companion booklet was designed by *Sing & Grow* music therapists for families to take home and use. The CD contains music exercises and the booklet guides parents to use the CD at home and reinforces why it is important to do these exercises with young children.

The program comprises ten sessions, however few families attend every session, and families can acquire the basic skills taught in the program within five sessions. However, families who attend more than five sessions receive enhanced benefits from the program's reinforcement, and families who attend one or two sessions may still obtain some benefits from participation.

Philosophical framework

Sing & Grow is grounded in attachment theory and the belief that secure relationships with caregivers formed and maintained in early childhood will act as a buffer against other stressors impacting on families, and will promote long-term emotional and developmental health and wellbeing in children. The program is strongly informed by strengths-based and empowerment frameworks.

Strengths-based techniques facilitate the family's identification of their own parenting and relational strengths. Positive feedback, modelling and facilitation promote and build upon parenting skills by expanding upon existing strengths, building self-confidence and providing practical and achievable measures for improvement. This strategy has proven particularly effective for young parents who have previously experienced services that may focus primarily on their weaknesses.

The *Sing & Grow* program uses intervention based on an empowerment model and so has been successful in engaging those hard to reach families due to the non-threatening setting created. This has been demonstrated in groups where parents who have had their children taken into care, have been abused, are currently living in a violent household and/or have mental health difficulties, have actively and successfully participated, learnt new parenting skills and reported feeling closer to their children.

The use of this empowerment framework is in strong contrast to the welfare model of care. Many parents who have experienced the welfare model of care are often resistant to engaging in any further intervention services, particularly if implemented by professionals associated with the welfare model. However, by using empowering and strengths-based music therapy techniques, intervention becomes implicit, rather than explicit and hence, is non-threatening and accessible to all families.

Program evaluation

Each group music therapy program is thoroughly evaluated using three methods. First, each Registered Music Therapist conducting groups documents weekly clinical observations relating to the specific objectives developed for the group. Second, parents are invited to complete baseline and post-intervention self-report questionnaires. Three, one or two families from each group are randomly selected to complete a follow-up phone survey one to three months following the close of the program. This survey relates specifically to the use of the at-home CD resource provided. Results of all three evaluation methods are collated for each group and then further synthesised to reflect the outcomes for the whole project. The findings from the program evaluations undertaken for the first three years of the project are presented below.

Attendance statistics

- 63 programs conducted
- 683 families referred to *Sing & Grow* programs
- 832 infants and toddlers participated in the program
- 93 per cent (635) of these families followed through and attended at least one session
- 54 per cent (342) of these families attended at least half of the sessions offered

Attendance statistics are not calculated for families who attend all ten sessions, as this is considered an unrealistic expectation of the program participants. Families are deemed to have successfully completed the program if they attend five sessions.

Parental feedback from self-report questionnaires

- 100 per cent of families enjoyed participating in the program rating it as “fun” or “very fun”;
- 90 per cent of families indicated that they felt the experience was valuable and had learnt new ways to use music at home;
- 87 per cent of families reported that the way they use music at home had changed since participation in *Sing & Grow* (more live music in the home and an increased repertoire of children’s songs, singing songs from the group together, playing real and imaginary instruments, using music to help settle children and help with general development and for behaviour management);
- 73 per cent of participants indicated that they now felt more comfortable singing and using music in the home environment;
- 94 per cent of parents have indicated that they would like to participate in another *Sing & Grow* project; and
- 70 per cent of respondents indicated that they felt closer to their child following participation in *Sing & Grow*, both during sessions and at home.

Clinical observations

Clinical observations documented by Registered Music Therapists indicate that the majority of participating families made marked improvements in all established goal areas as shown below:

- enhanced quality interactions between parent and child through musical play and movement;
- improved child physical and coordination skills;
- improved child cognitive skills;
- enhanced child language development;
- improved child social skills; and
- improved parental awareness of the use of music and movement to help strengthen the quality and range of family interactions in early childhood.

The Sing & Grow program uses music therapy to enhance child development directly.



Continual development

Rather than being based on any one specific piece of empirical research (there is little in this area), the development of *Sing & Grow* has been informed by local and international music therapy and social work literature describing work with vulnerable families. The program is also grounded in contemporary and emerging literature from the areas of child development, attachment theory, family therapy, social capital, risk and protective factors, and resilience. Regularly updated literature reviews allow for continued revision and integration of current theory, research and practice into the program.

The program has developed several collaborative service relationships over the past three years with both existing and emerging services working with at-risk families. It is anticipated that these existing partnerships will be maintained and further relationships developed through the formation of reference groups consisting of clients, key stakeholders, and representatives from other service providers. These reference groups will be used to inform the future development of the program and will be instrumental in the ongoing use of action research principles. The regular meetings of these groups will also provide opportunities for partner service providers to increase their own networks and will be a vehicle for the broad dissemination of information regarding the service and the active seeking of priority referrals. Reference group meetings also provide a vehicle for bringing together the many stakeholders who play an active role in supporting at-risk families.

Sing & Grow received a “Highly Commended” award in the Community Development, Capacity Building & Strengthening (Family Services) section of the 2003 National Child Protection Awards.

The *Sing & Grow* Program is currently provided by Playgroup Queensland. For further information on the *Sing & Grow* Project contact: Kate Williams (kwilliams@playgroupqld.com.au) or Vicky Abad (vabad@playgroupqld.com.au) Phone: (07) 3368 2622. Fax: (07) 3367 2522.

Kate Williams was the Acting Director of *Sing & Grow* from September 2003 to September 2004 and is now Senior Music Therapist with the project. Kate is a Registered Music Therapist with a special interest in mental health across the lifespan and is experienced in paediatrics, early intervention, mental health and disability. She is Chair of the Australian Music Therapy Association Publications Committee and is a clinical supervisor and tutor at the University of Queensland.