



During a home art activity, Orson watches his mother making the movements to accompany a song that reflects his current interests and that

is becoming increasingly familiar to him. Mirroring her movements deepens their attachment and helps Orson join up his experiences

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

# Going for a song

Shared singing with a carer with whom a child is securely attached is an important learning resource, says *Anne O'Connor*

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SIREN FILMS

Orson (age two) is sitting at the table with his mother. He is fascinated by spiders and loves singing songs about them, especially if they are scary. He is very familiar with the rhyme 'Insey Winsey Spider' and there is a toy spider on the table in front of him.

He focuses on mum's face and mirrors what she is doing with her fingers. He sings along, and although some of his words are indistinct, he is engrossed in behaving as a 'singer'. The words with most emphasis and repetition are the ones he is able to sing accurately. Mum and Orson maintain eye contact all the time and their facial expressions both show high levels of involvement.

**It might be hard to believe for some of us, but we are all born musical. The urge to sing is innate and babies begin to experiment with their voice from their earliest sounds.**

Being sung to is something that most of us experience very early on in our lives, because singing to babies seems to come easily and spontaneously – and is rewarded with smiles and rapturous attention, regardless of whether or not we have sung in key and can remember all the words. This seems to be common in all cultures, and because it is universal we can assume that music and singing have important evolutionary and biological links with human learning and development.

Our brains seem to be wired to respond to music, even when there

is profound hearing loss. This seems also to be linked with the instinctive way that adults often speak to babies and young children, which is known as 'parentese' and is recognisable by its 'sing-song' inflection and pitch. The high-pitched sound and its specific acoustic qualities seem to be just right for a baby's ears.

**Some researchers have suggested that songs and rhymes (together with story and dance) can be seen as 'tools for thinking' (Egan 1988; Rogoff 2003) and that children often use them to help make sense of the world and as part of a thought process.**

Even as adults, we sometimes find ourselves humming as we go about a task or ponder a problem. We can see the same thing in the work of the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia in Italy. Here they talk about the 'hundred languages of childhood' – the many different ways that children make sense of the world and translate an idea from one 'language' or mode of representation, to another. This is what Orson is doing as he makes links with the 'hands on' toy spider in front of him and the words, melody and actions of the spider in the song his mother sings with him. His brain may also be connecting with other spider experiences he has had – in stories, in pictures, on the television, as well as the real-life version. The Reggio approach seeks to recognise and makes good use of all these dif-

ferent creative possibilities for representation, in the firm belief that it supports learning and development.

**3 'We know a song about that, don't we?' might be an easy joke to make about nursery teachers, but there is no denying that they make good use of songs and rhymes to help children make connections.**

It's true – we usually do know a song about most things, and if we don't, we'll make one up! We use song throughout the day for a variety of reasons: to gather children together, to reinforce a new concept or theme, to celebrate birthdays and special occasions, or just because we feel like it.

Spontaneous singing is just as valid as timetabled sessions for music and can help children make links with previous experience. Here Orson is being helped to join up all his other experiences of spiders through the repeated pattern of a familiar song with which he is increasingly able to join in.

**4 The spider theme also has links with what we know about schemas – described by Tina Bruce as 'patterns of linked behaviours which the child can generalise and use in a whole variety of different situations'.**

It is fairly easy to make connections between Orson's interest in spiders and singing songs about them, but there may be other patterns of his

behaviour that seem to have nothing to do with this particular interest.

A knowledge and understanding of schemas, however, would throw light on these and, very importantly, enable adults to help support and extend his learning. An interest in spiders, for example, might link with a 'core and radial' schema – the core being the 'body' of the spider and the radials the 'legs'. Orson's mark-making and painting might involve circles with radials coming out from them, often interpreted as 'the sun'. He has already made a link between his fingers and Insey Winsey, but it may be that he shows particular attention to his fingers (radials) and the movements they can make.

Providing resources such as sticks or straws with clay or dough gives children with this schema more opportunities to experiment with core and radials. It may even be that his interest in spiders has been generated by the schema, rather than the other way around. But there is no doubt that Orson enjoys wallowing in his fascination with spiders. At this stage, he isn't learning any scientific facts about spiders (other than their propensity to climb out of plugholes, perhaps) but his mother's attunement to his interest and motivations provides other very powerful messages for his brain.

**5 The responsiveness of Orson's mother in recognising what interests him and being prepared to provide what he needs (by singing the song over**



REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- *Threads of Thinking: Young Children Learning and the Role of Early Education* by Cathy Nutbrown (Paul Chapman)
- *Early Childhood Education* by Tina Bruce (Hodder & Stoughton)
- *Supporting Musical Development in the Early Years* by Linda Pound and Chris Harrison (Supporting Early Learning series, Open University Press)
- *The Cultural Nature of Human Development* by B Rogoff (Oxford University Press)
- *The Year of Opportunity* by Maria Robinson (Open University Press)

FURTHER INFORMATION

The stills are taken from Siren Films' 'Supporting Early Literacy'. Visit [www.sirenfilms.co.uk](http://www.sirenfilms.co.uk) or call 0191 232 7900

and over again) reinforces his sense of being nurtured.

His intense focus on mum's face and their eye contact is evidence of the security of their attachment, and further reinforces it. There are positive feelings for both of them in this little singing session and the presence of opioids, or 'feel good' chemicals washing over their brains, will mean they both will want to repeat the experience another time.

There are important messages here for those caring as key people.

- How well do we know what interests our children?
- What songs do they know from home?
- What are their favourite rhymes and how do their likes and dislikes of songs link with their patterns of behaviour and schema?
- Which music provides comfort and what kinds invigorate or calm them?
- How do we use spontaneous as well as scheduled singing times to bond with our children?

Sadly, a lot of adults miss out on opportunities to sing with others. As practitioners we should make the most of the fact that an essential part of our job is to sing our hearts out every day! ■



LINKS TO THE EYFS GUIDANCE

- **UC 1.1** Child Development
- **PR 2.3** Supporting Learning
- **EE 3.2** Supporting Every Child
- **L&D 4.3** Creativity and Critical Thinking