



9. Let's make it Up: Improvisation/Spontaneous Songs

Hello! This is Amy McConkey Robbins and we're going to talk about Improvisation and spontaneous songs. Somewhere between 18 and 36 months of age, children with typical hearing begin singing spontaneous songs. Usually this happens during free play and tends to be a musical narration of what the child is doing. Sometimes, they incorporate fragments of standard or learned songs into their created songs. Theorists believe that this spontaneous singing has a way of helping the child regulate behavior and emotions, manage their experiences, practice the art of singing vs. speaking, and focus on the task at hand. This singing is not done because it's clever or beautiful; it's done for the child himself. Other times, spontaneous songs are used to communicate with others, seek attention, identify themselves and influence the behavior of relationships.

What's so exciting is that, in children who've had early and consistent access to auditory experiences, including music, we can document that they demonstrate spontaneous songs. This is evidence that the auditory input from state-of-the-art technology allows a child to replicate an important developmental stage.

But here's the caveat: We have to be vigilant to listen for these songs. And, of course, we encourage parents to be on the lookout for spontaneous singing from their child with hearing loss and to recognize it appropriately. I have a child in my practice whose mother shared this story: Her 3 year old was upset in the morning because she wouldn't be going to her grandmother's house for playtime that day. Later, Mom heard the child playing with her dolls, having calmed herself down via self-regulation behaviors, including singing. Mom heard, "I not going a Grandma's aday. I not going a Gwama's a day. You are my friend you are special, you my friend, you special to me." The child was combining a spontaneous song about her feelings and situation with lines from a song learned on Mr. Rogers Neighborhood.

As a child matures, spontaneous songs give way to music improvisation, with the intent to produce a musically-pleasing product. Improvisation can be sung or played. It can be done alone, with another, or within a group. It can be percussion based (on the body, or with rhythm instruments or drums) or tonal (playing or singing melodies). Over time, some of these little improvisations can become compositions.

In music therapy sessions at St. Joseph Institute, Chris Barton uses improvisation to promote expression and interactions, both non-verbal and verbal, and a sense of contribution to the group. Watch for video examples from her sessions.

Until next time, remember:

Do Music. REAL Music. Every day!