

Being engaged in any art form has many benefits which can't be reduced to a mechanistic totting up of what is seen as 'good for you'. But at a time when there is a strong emphasis on the need to ensure all children get the best start – and when almost a quarter of our primary school aged children are overweight - it is important to recognise the contribution of the arts to children's all-round happiness and health. We all know that babies grow quickly and that due to our complex human brain, all experiences affect how we develop as children (and in adulthood).

Sally Godard Blythe MSc. FRSA, author of several books on child development, is a freelance consultant in neuro-developmental education and Director of Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology in Chester (INPP). Writing in *Nursery World* (December 2009), she sets out how she sees the foundation for learning is in the physical readiness nurtured in 0-5 year olds. 'Movement, touch and music are like the environmental software that enable the developing nervous system of the child to unfold its potential.'

She goes on to outline how rhythm expressed through movement and tone expressed through the voice are building blocks for language acquisition. She describes how babies' innate ability to mimic movements, feelings and gestures, as part of their communication, becomes part of a 'mirror neuron system, which is able to sense and recognise the feelings of others – the origins of sympathy.'

She asserts that music, especially song, can teach language by introducing children to the cadences and patterns of language, helping speech to remain in the memory. In particular music develops both sides of the brain during the early years. Early movement experience helps a child to 'know their place in space' and to develop fitness, sensory awareness, regulation of strength and self-control and involving flexible and creative behaviour.

If we accept how important it is for children to have opportunities to experience active play, the sedentary behaviour caused by watching tv or computer screens is a cause for concern. Psychologist Aric Sigman, presenting information to a UK parliament group, said that screen time may not only reduce metabolic rate but can interfere with language acquisition and sleep patterns of young children.

Physical activity increases our heart rate and brings oxygen to our bloodstream, to our brain and tissues. It also affects our endocrine system and the hormones that influence our mood. While we can't separate the wellbeing of our bodies and brains, music, dance, drama and the visual arts can be seen to offer valuable physical activity as well as emotional, intellectual and aesthetic benefits.

A recent Scottish Government 'Evidence Briefing' examined the research on the role of physical activity in promoting mental wellbeing and preventing mental health problems. The Briefing notes evidence that promoting cooperative activity in welcoming and inclusive environments produces particularly strong positive effects.

“...While it is not known exactly how physical activity influences mental health, a number of possible explanatory mechanisms have been suggested. These include:

- **Biochemical and physiological changes**

Increases in chemicals in the brain, such as serotonin, can increase positive mood levels.

- **Improvements in fitness and weight loss**

Feeling that the body is fitter or more 'toned' is associated with improved mental wellbeing.

- **Increased sense of 'mastery'**

Improved self-worth and personal control as a result of mastering a new physical activity.

- **Distraction**

Physical activity can distract us from stressful parts of our lives.

- **Social interaction and sense of belonging**

The positive collective experience of being active as a group.

- **Social and cultural benefits**

Physical activity is largely seen as socially and culturally 'virtuous' and therefore has the potential to increase self-esteem."

In the Highlands, all families with children under 5 years old are offered the series *play @ home* books which have ideas for active games with matching songs and rhymes and *Bookstart* packs with picture and story books. Many libraries also offer 'rhymetime' sessions. Artsplay Highland also contributes through its long commitment to providing music and movement for very young children through 'Music Trains' projects.

Research is confirming what we instinctively know – chances to hear and make music and to move to rhythm are not only enjoyable but are very important for our children's wellbeing and development. Essentially, making a song and dance is exactly what our children should be doing!

Julia Nelson 2010

