**Smiles and Laughter in Early Years – Ways to have a Jolly June**

“Laughter is the music of the soul”

Is an extremely popular quote that we see adorning attractive household decorative pieces or added to motivational images… yet I hope our familiarity with this phrase does not desensitize us to the meaning, especially when considering its pertinence to early years.

Hans Christian Andersen is also famously quoted saying;

“where words fail, music speaks”

I therefore have my very own ‘motivational quote’ by aligning these two together, and this underpins the principles of my practice, research and even parenting;

*“Laughter is the music of the soul, and where words fail, music speaks”*

I’d like to share how this can form an undertone for our practice in Early Years, and why it is important we do so.

Bowlby (1958) and Ainsworth (1970) ‘Attachment Theories’ have had a considerable impact on our understanding and appreciation of the relationship between an infant and their caregivers. The influence of this has enabled us to research the automatic responses from caregivers to emotional cues from the baby, and the significance this has on both adult and child in terms of; the strength of the bond, fulfilment of needs, and holistic development and wellbeing. The cry and smile signals are the earliest forms of communication from a baby; crying begins at birth, and social smiles as early as 1 month. Laughter follows soon after by 4 months, thus by the time a child usually accesses early years provision, they already have differentiated cries, smiles and laughter in their repertoire.

Fisher (2013) ‘Filming Interactions to Nurture Development’ project highlights the consequences of infants and adults being involved in ‘Serve and Return’ interactions for development and wellbeing, so much so this has an impact on the brains architecture. When interactions occur in caring and responsive ways, they help build and reinforce neural connections. You may remember the NSPCC advert that showed a child in a cot no longer crying, as they’d been conditioned through neglect that no one returned their cue, and sadly we know that children who do not have their cues returned for a prolonged period of time will suffer socially and emotionally (perhaps some) for the rest of their lives. On the other hand, Fisher (2013) and the team of researchers propose 5 key ways we can impart serve and return practices for parents, and implement these ourselves:

1. Notice the serve – take equal time to notice cries or grumbles as well as smiles and positive or neutral cues (the significance of this is discussed later in the article)
2. Return the serve - we must be mindful to not bias our responses to negative cues mostly/only, whilst urgency and priority of need is a must, we should equally encourage positivity
3. Give it a name – the need or matter for attention can be labelled
4. Turn take and wait – avoid filling absence of a return with another serve too quickly
5. Ends and beginnings – acknowledge the end/start of an interaction or shift in attention

Research by Mizugaki *et al* (2015) explored maternal reactions to their babies crying, neutrality and smiling, and discovered that the physical stress response from mothers was naturally alerted at crying, remained neutral for neutrality, but interestingly their physical stress response decelerated with smiling. The work of Fredrickson and Levenson (1998) ‘Undoing Effect’ could be adopted to such findings here, as physical stress responses can be arguably ‘undone’ by exposure to de-stressors, in this case smiles.

DfE (2017) Statutory Requirements of the EYFS remind us that it is our duty of care to work in partnership with parents and empowered with knowledge on the physiological impact of exposure to smiles, it could be recommended we should increase the instances and methods of sharing the smiles of children with their families. Perhaps have a ‘Giggle Graph’ plotting how many instances of smiles and laughter have occurred in a day (full cohort display or individualised), maybe a ‘Laughter Lab’ where the overarching purpose of the environment or activity is to have a giggle with one another, or, simply being conscious of the information we share with parents - being careful not to overly discuss routines e.g. what and how much was eaten, or curricula milestones, but making sure we are sharing daily anecdotes of what really made their child smile or laugh, add photos where possible.

Further we must push how positive sharing in smiles and ‘positive returns’ can be. How often as parents or even practitioners after a difficult day with lots of tears is it to crash when a placid or content period occurs? Maybe we use those contented moments to get other pressing jobs done, and continue with our stressful day? When in actuality, returning the positive cue, or attempting to elicit a smile may do more good for both child and adult as the interaction is an accelerated de-stressor. The value this can have for how we offer parenting support and advice can be significant, Cohen (2001) suggests that ‘following the giggles’ can work wonders for nurturing relationships, increasing connectedness, and support behaviours, Cohen (2001) reminds us that our talk types, especially playful talk (Gifford 1997 and 2004) can completely change a situation; responding to, or purposefully eliciting a smile or laugh can diffuse a stressful situation, or incur a new positive one. If we consider Infant Directed Speech (Parentese or Sing Song Voice) this melodic tone we speak with can rapidly produce smiles and warm giggles.

If we look at the Nvaja Tribe, they associate the significance of a babies first laugh with official ‘joining of the family’ and have a huge celebration for the event, whilst this context is culturally and spiritually specific to the tribe, we can certainly learn from them. Mierault *et al* (2018) research indicates that babies as young as 5 months begin to respond to absurd (humorous) cues with smiles and laughter, whilst this can be linked to responding simply to the other smile cues from parents around them at the same point, the research noted that even if a parent remained neutral during the absurd instance, at 5 months the smile response would still be given, thus we can see appreciation and understanding of humour as an outward sign of cognition at a very young age. This complex thinking and developmental milestone should surely be celebrated in practice, and we could do much more in our provisions to prompt humour for the cognitive and wellbeing benefits. Absurdity is arguably the earliest form of humour in childhood, and therefore my three main tickle pins are:

1. Physical Comedy – Tickle Time is an easy win, the book ‘Calm Down Boris’ is a fabulous one to add tickle time to a literacy activity. You could even play Tickle Tag where the person who is ‘on’ must tickle their friends to catch them. Perhaps consider who can pull the funniest face, do the silliest walk, or jolliest dance move.
2. Incongruous Items – A firm favourite of a team (and children) of mine has been the banana from the role play kitchen, because this becomes the Banana Phone, oh the silly conversations that can occur on the banana phone are endless. But other incorrect and silly connections can be made e.g. animal sounds - playing with farm animals making all the wrong noises as the farms gone all funny, clothing – dressing up trousers on arms, endless opportunities from making ludicrous links.
3. Silly Words – Great for pre-literacy/phonics can be making up silly sounds and words as it exercises the mouth (so too does the smiling and laughter that follow) and introduces phonemes. Perhaps try singing along to a familiar nursery rhyme tune using jazzy scat lingo “zoobity doobety scadilly daaa.”

At a point where we’re facing mental health concerns in adolescence, yet still find ourselves fighting the over assessment and formalisation of early childhood, why not fill your provision with the music of laughter, after all,

*“Laughter is the music of the soul, and where words fail, music speaks”*

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