

The PlayParty Project in Oberlin: A Family Affair

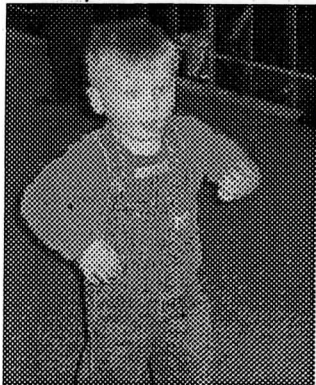
By Peggy D. Bennett

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Sitting in my office one spring day in 2003, I reminisced about the previous evening's MusicPlay classes and the absolute joy I saw there. Images were vivid of the playful, joyful interactions as parents and children laughed, hugged, and moved together. As we gathered into a circle, "Looby Loo" was the song that prompted the question, "What will we put in this time?" Parents' enthusiasm matched that of their children as they sang and moved around the circle. Whether a child suggested our fingers, our ear, our tummies, or our "jump," we all smiled as we unhesitatingly embraced the children's ideas and performed them with abandon.

Watching a parent and child sing and play together has always touched me deeply, mainly because it gives me hope: hope that these moments will help families build and preserve an "interactional vocabulary" for being together. Pardon this boldness, but I also hope that when families engage in the simplicity of song-game activities, it may be an antidote for the nasty and hurtful behaviors being shown with such enthusiasm on television, in movies, and in newspapers.

MusicPlay is the name of the early childhood music program that began at Oberlin Conservatory over twenty years ago. For the past five years, I have been director and instructor for the program. For twelve weeks, I teach two sessions each week for



three-, four-, and five-year-old children. Enrollment is limited to twelve children per class, and children attend the forty-five-minute sessions with their parents. MusicPlay is popular and registration is full each semester, yet the twelve-

week commitment, tuition fee, and time and day prevent some area families from participating.

So, as I sat at my desk that afternoon three years ago, I began to wonder: How could I recreate the family affair that I had witnessed in MusicPlay and offer it to more families in our community? The answer to my question came swiftly: PlayParties! I'll start an Oberlin PlayParty project!

PlayParties in Our History

Popular social gatherings of the early 1900s frontier, PlayParties offered welcome relief to the isolation and toil-ridden existences that characterized many rural Americans' lives. The emphasis on "play" and "party" that the name suggests reflects the avoidance of dancing and instrumental music that religious beliefs and practices of the day demanded. Dancing was "wicked sport," (Rohrbaugh 1940, p. 1) but playing games was considered relatively harmless. "Many people consider it [PlayParty] our most typical native contribution to the world of folk dancing. It is unsophisticated, rural, and ingenuous. It makes the most from the least. In this pattern, several generations of American youth created a fresh, vigorous, engaging social recreation, requiring no accompaniment, expense, or leadership" (Rohrbaugh 1940, p. 1).

Through PlayParties, families immersed themselves in singing and playing what became "traditional" singing games. Emphasis was on "doing" rather than "teaching," and folks from two to seventy-two years old joined hands and sang and moved and played. "No equipment whatever is needed for PlayParty games. They can be used in almost any place, time, or circumstance" (Rohrbaugh 1940, p. 3).

Proposing the Project

Recreating the profoundly simple qualities of the early PlayParties for our Oberlin-area families

became my goal. Would today's families be attracted to unaccompanied singing, no-frills music-making, and unadorned playfulness?

Although I receive no salary and purchase no materials for PlayParties, I wanted administrative support for initiating this project. In the proposal, the PlayParty project was defined as a community outreach activity whose purpose was "to create an inter-generational environment in which children and grown-ups (a) sing and play together, (b) learn songs of the American heritage, and (c) interact in ways that nurture the social, physical, linguistic, perceptual, and musical growth of all involved." The PlayParty project, after receiving administrative approval, was ready to launch in fall 2003.

Andrea McAlister, director of the Community Music School at Oberlin Conservatory, contacted Nancy Sabbath, director of the Oberlin Early Childhood Center (OECC), to secure a large, empty, carpeted room at the Center for the PlayParties. Sabbath was enthusiastic about hosting these events at her facility because they aligned with OECC's goal of involving parents in their children's education. We rented the room and paid for a center employee to be a "door attendant" as families arrived and departed. Our original idea was to move to a different Oberlin location for each PlayParty to draw various populations of families, but we soon realized that this notion was more ideal than practical. Predictability in the date, time, and place for PlayParties was a benefit to families. So, we continue to meet at our original OECC location.

PlayParties are free and open to children ages two to ten. All children attend with parents and/or grandparents, and it is understood that PlayParties are for family participation. PlayParties are held on second Wednesdays, for forty-five minutes, from 6:30–7:15 pm. The first year we held a PlayParty each month during fall and spring semesters, eight PlayParties total. From the second year on, we have offered PlayParties twice per semester: October, November, March, and April.

Advertisements (fliers with dates, times, and a brief description) are placed in the local paper, posted in local businesses, and distributed in area elementary

and preschools. Fliers are distributed about a week prior to each PlayParty, and I send e-mail reminders to listings of families who have participated in PlayParties or the MusicPlay program.



PlayParty Activities

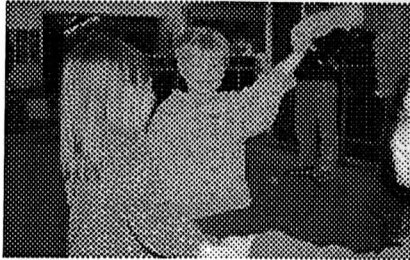
PlayParty music had been passed from family to family, generation to generation through oral tradition. Therefore, I wanted the content of Oberlin PlayParties to be portable: songs and activities that families could take home with them. From this foundation, I began developing some priorities for how the PlayParty experiences would unfold.

For each PlayParty, two college students assist me. When children arrive, they are welcomed and warmly greeted by name. A college student assistant makes nametags showing each child's first name. Rather than using nametags for parents, we call them by their child's name: Nora's mom, Jakob's dad, and so on. Student assistants help by leaving activities momentarily to welcome and greet late arrivals, preparing and playing a CD when needed, and modeling certain "turns" so that families see sample responses. Some assistants, especially those who have student taught, may lead activities after planning with me prior to the PlayParty.

A routine has evolved for our PlayParties that begins when all families gather to sit in one group. Then, I set the tone of our time together by sharing the meaning of the PlayParty tradition; I tell the "story" of PlayParties past, how they began, and why they were held. A family of PlayParty "regulars" had heard this story several times. One evening when I began my tale, Iris, who is about six years old, raised her hand and said, "I can tell it!" Surprised, I said, "Okay, Iris, tell us about PlayParties." And, so she did, explaining in impressive detail to all present the historical significance of these family affairs.

Singing begins when we move into a standing cir-

cle and sing "All Join Hands," a singing game in which children show the group ways to go "round" as we sing "round and around and around we go."



All ideas are "right," and they are greeted with warm smiles and imitation by all in the circle. After several turns of "All Join Hands," we move on to a

variety of activity possibilities.

The PlayParty songs that have worked well for our families are resilient to repetition, and actions to accompany these songs are occasionally made up on the spot. Some that we use frequently include the following:

- "Skip to My Lou." Sing it as "round and round and round we go," or act out verses with "story bits" for "little red wagon" and "shoo fly, shoo."
- "Paw Paw Patch." Parents and children go looking for "pretty little Susie" as she hides behind a "bush" of family groupings.
- "Punchinella." A child and his or her parent(s) move into the center of a circle and show a motion that all families imitate as they sing.
- "Head and Shoulders, Baby." Parents and children perform a hand-clapping game as they sing and suggest new motions.
- "Shoo Fly, Don't Bother Me." All "shoo" away a fly from the pie in the center of the circle.
- "Where, Oh Where, Has My Little Dog Gone." As a child hides his or her eyes on a parent, a small cloth dog passes around the circle; then the child tries to find it.
- "Go In and Out the Window." A line weaves through the circle, adding a new person each time the song stops.
- "Bluebird, Bluebird, through My Window." A bluebird flies to a "shopkeeper" to buy some candy.
- "Little Sally Ann." A child or parent in the circle center gets to act out "weeping and crying" as all sing and move.
- "Zudio." Parents and children choose a way to

"walk fancy" together as all sing and watch.

- "Mary Wore Her Red Dress." All sing about an article of clothing that a child describes.

The focus for activities is on variety, fun, and *people* as music makers. Designed to request children's ideas, activities provide fail-safe, nonthreatening ways for children to say what they see, hear, and think as they sing and play (Bennett and Bartholomew 1997; Bennett and Bartholomew 1999; Bennett 1999).

Older children help younger ones, children mix with friends and strangers, two children barely a yard tall discover each other and giggle, and parents delight in other children's responses as much as they do in those of their own children. In our forty-five-minute sessions, we usually experience seven to ten different songs and activities. Old standards for PlayParties become stuck in our heads, a sure sign that these oldies but goodies are "keepers" for the "family music" that Ruth Crawford Seeger so touchingly described (Seeger 1948).

In this situation, I don't really "teach" a game; we learn by playing it. There is little talking, little instruction, and lots of immersion. Our PlayParties offer immediate involvement, nonthreatening participation, fun, focus, and a lively pace. I often repeat songs and games from PlayParty to PlayParty, and children seem to welcome the activities as familiar friends.

What I Have Learned

Planning for PlayParties calls for imagination and flexibility. As with all my work with children, I want to choose activities in which children's ideas and responses shape the playfulness we all experience. I plan for children and parents to mix with others while at the same time making it okay for some children to keep their parents as partners. Children make many kinds of choices, and parents take turns just like their children do. Activities offer variety in the ways we use names, work with partners, participate with the whole group, sit and sing, stand and sing, circle and sing, and exercise imaginations.

When some children wander off, need a little time to watch, or decline to take a turn, I am not

overly concerned; they are allowed to do that. Children deserve time to scope out the process, especially in the midst of many strangers. I am comforted by knowing they are taking in the activity even if they do not look like they are, and I respect their choice and degree of readiness for whole-group participation.

Because I never know how many children will attend each PlayParty or what their ages will be, my expectations for *how* we play must remain flexible. A point that may feel awkward to some reading this is that I make no attempt to instruct about musical elements; we just sing, play, and dance. So, what I am doing is not so much “music teaching” as it is “leading music activities” (Bennett and Bartholomew 1997, pp. 26–28). Harkening back to the original tradition, the PlayParties I lead are simply that: leading families in singing and playing together.

Although I have access to an amazing array of stellar musicians who could perform for us, I do not use PlayParties for listening to performances. Instead our focus is on *us* making the music, using our voices and bodies. To reiterate, I rely on singing, moving, and playing rather than on instruments or recorded music as foundational experiences. I want each individual, tall and small, to be a music maker for each PlayParty.

Over the three years that Oberlin PlayParties have been held, we usually have twenty or so participants for any given date. The number attending, however, has ranged from eight to thirty participants from the small town of Oberlin and surrounding communities. One PlayParty scheduled just before a major holiday yielded initial disappointment for me and my assistants when only four children arrived, each with one parent. The evening turned into a charming experience, however, as our hastily-revised-on-the-spot plans were met with eager, fully attentive offerings from those four children.

When the Arbogast family, consisting of two parents and three children (Iris, Eli, and Greta), was new to the Oberlin area, they appreciated the PlayParty as a place to meet new children and their families. Father Bo noticed the absence of “any competition or ill-feelings,” during PlayParties, due in part, he said, to the emphasis on “equal attention, even when equal turns were not possible.”

When asked why the family made it a priority to carve out forty-five minutes from their busy schedules for attending a PlayParty, Bo responded: “Our kids enjoy music and we often don’t make time in our lives to dance and sing. The ‘scheduled event’ aspect is important to us—we like to go, we know it’s good for us.”

When Jolynn McFerren brings Aidan (4) and Campbell (18 months) to PlayParties, she values the accepting environment as “a wonderful opportunity for my children to sing, dance, and just act silly in a safe setting. It also encourages listening skills, general social interaction, and cooperation with both adults and children—must-have qualities as my preschoolers move into a formal school setting.”

Four-year-old Brennan rushed over to me one evening and excitedly told me that he and his cousin Maggie led their relatives in singing and playing “Punchinella” at a recent family gathering. Before Brennan had completed his story, detailing how they played the game, his aunt chimed in that “the grown-ups had just as much fun as the children!”



College students have enjoyed the no-stress, no-hassle, high-fun atmosphere of the PlayParties so much that they consider the PlayParties their “kid therapy” nights. As they relish the innocence and glee with which children sing and play, they get to simply “be there” in the midst of families having fun.

Just as folk did in the PlayParties of yesteryear, we take an immersion approach to learning songs and games; we simply jump in and do them. There is no magic formula for a successful PlayParty—or maybe there is. For me, success may not be what some of us typically look for and listen for in teaching music—or maybe it is. When I see the look of delight on a dad’s face as he takes a turn as the fly in “Shoo Fly,” the look of transformation on a child’s face as she becomes Little Sally Ann, and the looks of loving kindness between parents and children as they sing and play together, then I know our PlayParty is successful; it’s been a family affair!

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