The Notes of Growth

Program uses music to enhance early development

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CHESAPEAKE — Skip to My Lou. That sweet, innocuous song every child has danced to over the decades. It's a ritual of childhood, and seemingly nothing else.

But that's not how music therapist Joni Pappas sees it. And in the "Grow with Music" program she started at Marshall University a year ago, it can be one of the ways children increase their development skills, be it physical or social.

"Grow With Music" is based on the tenets of music therapy using music to address non-musical areas with early childhood intervention," Pappas said. "It's not just for children with special needs. It's early childhood enrichment."

The 15-week program with a class size limited to eight is open to four separate age divisions — Birth to 18-months; Toddler Class for 18-36 months; 3-year-olds; and Pre-K for 4 and 5 year olds. For classes up to the age of 3, parents are required to participate with their child in the program.

Something as simple as "Skip To My Lou" can be used to enhance a child's ability for movement when the actions to the song are changed.

"We can change it to "hop." That is another way to move our bodies," Pappas said. "Music therapy activities enhance the domain of development. All the music is used to enhance cognitive, gross and fine motor shills, social skills, communication and language."

Pappas likes to sing to the children a "Hello" song in which she uses each child's name as she goes around the room.

"That is specifically more for social skills, maintaining eye contact and proper etiquette for conversation," she said.

Pappas has found American folk songs are a good fit for what she wants to accomplish in her classes.

"Folk songs are naturally functional," she said. "They are not purely for entertainment. It's music beyond itself. They are easy and repetitive. The melodies are easy. Parents can learn them. Sometimes I will adapt and change the lyrics."

Melanie Daniels of Chesapeake started her toddler Andrew in the program in September. In that 15-week period Daniels has seen developmental changes in Andrew, who will turn 2 on Jan. 19.

"With my first little boy, he was quick to speak and started to say words early. Andrew is a little slow," Daniels said.

She wasn't sure if the reason was second-child syndrome or because the child has had tubes in his ears.

"He does talk, but we wanted to jump start things," the mother said.

When a neighbor told her about Pappas' class, Daniels decided to give it a try.

"He responds real well. He has picked up four words from that class alone," she said. "He loves the instruments. The guitar and drum are his favorites. He likes to dance in the class. When he first started, he was not as open. He held back. Now he gets up with the others."

Daniels wants to continue the program until Andrew reaches 5, the cap age for the program.

The next series of classes begins the first week in February. Early registration ends on Jan. 10. That rate is $150 for the 15 weeks. After Jan. 10, the rate is $160.

To register or for more information contact Pappas at pappasj@marshall.edu or at (304) 697-0211. Registration is open up to the day classes begin.

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