

Submission for Early Years Strategy – Australian Government Department of Social Services
The importance of music in the early years

The aim of this submission is to stress that the use of music is an important factor to include and consider in this early years strategy plan.

I have been a Registered Music Therapist in private practice for over 22 years working in a variety of clinical settings, including early childhood (0-5) and their families.

I also live and work in a rural area of NSW (Grafton), where services for families can be limited. I have been facilitating 'Sing&Grow' music therapy group programs in my area since 2009 (14 years). Sing&Grow is an evidence based program which focuses on strengthening family relationships, building capacity in parents to support their children's development in the early years of life, and supporting children's transition to school. It is only delivered by Registered Music Therapists. See – www.playmatters.org.au/sing-and-grow - I have attached a significant research paper from this website.

Music can have a significant impact on the early years of a child's development. In my clinical experience working with 0-5 year olds, the impact of specialised designed music therapy programs that suit the needs of the groups of families that I am referred to me, have shown very positive outcomes and responses by both the babies/children and the parent/caregiver that attend. Live music is used in a therapeutic way – using singing, instrument playing, songs and movement activities.

The benefits I have witnessed and documented are:

- Pre-verbal children respond without the need for words
- Families have fun and enjoy quality interaction
- Parents wake their children from a sleep to attend as they value the experience so much
- Songs such as the 'Pack away song' motivate children to follow direction without words
- Singing and connecting to music can change the mood of an individual
- The families connect with each other more easily than just sitting and talking
- Non-invasive way to help children and families relax
- Pregnancy – good feeling hormones cross the placenta
- Pregnancy songs – soothing the unborn baby and mother
- Music can easily distract from unwanted behaviours
- Non medical intervention



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Sing & Grow
AUSTRALIA



SING & GROW
FINAL EVALUATION REPORT
NOVEMBER 2019

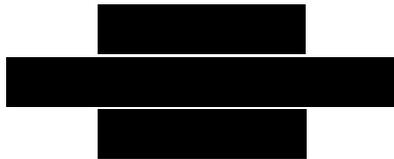
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Executive Summary

Sing and Grow (Sing&Grow) is a federally-funded music therapy program with key objectives to develop positive communication and social experiences for parents of young children through group musical interventions. This report details a national evaluation project conducted in 2019.

The research questions were:

1. Do Sing&Grow parent participants report increased parenting self-efficacy over time?
2. Do Sing&Grow parent participants report increased parenting responsiveness over time?
3. Do Sing&Grow parent participants report an increase in home uses of music with children?
4. Do Sing&Grow child participants show improvements in parent-reported self-regulation over time?
5. How do past participants describe the impact of Sing&Grow on their family and their child's transition to school?

Two phases of the study were conducted:

Study Phase A - the Quantitative stage – collected pre and post survey data from 318 parent participants. Findings included statistically significant improvements from pre to post intervention for:

- two parenting self-efficacy scales of discipline and play
- parental use of music at home
- children's cognitive self-regulation.

Study Phase B – the Qualitative stage – collected interview data from 10 participants through telephone or online video link, using semi-structured interviews of approximately 20 minutes duration. The findings suggested that participation in the Sing&Grow program encouraged social connectedness through promoting inclusivity, belonging and confidence boosting. Positive relationships were evidenced by improved bonding, and stronger relationships between siblings, caregivers and children. Parents believed the program educated them about child development, culturally accepted parenting and gave them parenting tools. Parent-reported benefits for children include developing confidence, social skills, language and communication, motor skills, self-regulation and other attributes necessary for successful participation in more formalised learning environments such as school. The participant who attended the Sing&Grow Off to School transition program unreservedly endorsed the program for inculcating the necessary skills for successful school transition for her son and herself. Parents were unanimous in their advocacy of the program as a positive intervention in their family life.

A number of recommendations for the program are provided in the report.

1. Background

Sing&Grow AUSTRALIA is a federally funded music therapy project working with children aged birth to five years in communities across Australia. The program provides an opportunity for parents to learn new ways to integrate positive social and communication experiences into their child's daily routines. For young children, such experiences are recognised for their capacity to improve future life trajectories. Each year approximately 2500 families (parents and children together) participate in Sing&Grow services across Australia. Services offered by Sing&Grow include group programs of 8 weeks duration. QUT have been working collaboratively with Sing&Grow since 2005. Previous projects have focused on the efficacy of the program in improving self-reported mental health and clinician-observed parenting behaviours and child social and communication development (Nicholson, Berthelsen, Abad, Williams, & Bradley, 2008; Nicholson, Berthelsen, Williams, & Abad, 2010; Williams, Berthelsen, Nicholson, Walker, & Abad, 2012). Additionally, a small-scale study in 2015 to measure improvements in children's self-regulatory skills due to participation in the program was undertaken with results indicating that there were statistically significant improvements in clinician-observed attentional and emotional regulation of children following participation in a Sing&Grow program.

1.1 The current evaluation

Prior research in collaboration with QUT School of Early Childhood has produced evidence showing the value of the program in increasing positive parenting behaviours, stimulating child social and communication development and the extent to which the program also stimulates positive changes in children's self-regulation skills. This project builds and extends upon the ongoing program of research collaboratively undertaken by QUT and Sing&Grow AUSTRALIA since 2005. In particular, this evaluation focuses on the effectiveness of the Sing&Grow program to increase parent and child capacities through

- A) measuring the extent to which the program participants report changes in parenting self-efficacy, responsive parenting, and home use of music with children over time, in addition to measuring changes in child self-regulation and behaviour over time.
- B) exploring qualitative data from participating families in relation to children's transition to school following earlier participation in Sing&Grow.

2. Overview of Evaluation and Key Evaluation Questions

Previously reported results have demonstrated the efficacy of the Sing&Grow program in improving self-reported parent mental health and clinician-observed parenting behaviours and child social and communication development (Nicholson et al., 2008; Nicholson et al., 2010; Williams et al., 2012). However, the effectiveness in the program in improving parents' self-efficacy and responsive parenting skills in relation to incorporating music into their children's lives has not been explored. Self-efficacy refers to a person's belief in their ability to perform a certain task (Wittkowski, Garrett, Calam, & Weisberg, 2017). This evaluation specifically sought to understand how involvement in the program improved parents' self-efficacy to

support their child’s development through the use of music as well as developing their responsive parenting skills. Responsive parenting or responsiveness is an essential parenting tool where the caregiver is able to observe and respond promptly and appropriately to a child’s cues, thus supporting children’s cognitive development (Eshel, Daelmans, de Mello, & Martines, 2006). Higher levels of active music making with young children in the home has been linked with important outcomes at transition to school including prosocial skills and attentional regulation (Williams, Barrett, Welch, Abad, & Broughton, 2015), and thus changes in these practices are important mediating pathways for families.

The research questions were

1. Do Sing&Grow parent participants report increased parenting self-efficacy over time?
2. Do Sing&Grow parent participants report increased parenting responsiveness over time?
3. Do Sing&Grow parent participants report an increase in home uses of music with children?
4. Do Sing&Grow child participants show improvements in parent-reported self-regulation over time?
5. How do past participants describe the impact of Sing&Grow on their family and their child’s transition to school?

The outcomes presented here provide valuable information on the effectiveness of this program and help to determine whether Sing&Grow is meeting the program’s focus of strengthening family relationships and building capacity in parents to support their children’s development in the early years.

3. Evaluation Methodology

3.1 Participant recruitment

Study Phase A (Quantitative surveys): All families enrolled in Term 2 and Term 3 Sing&Grow programs were approached to participate in a parent-self report survey regarding their perceptions of their parenting whilst participating in the program, in addition to a parent-reported child self-regulation and behaviour questionnaire. It was anticipated that this would mean 230 to 460 children invited, with 75% of these consenting, and 70% of those consenting retained to Time 2.

Records available show that approximately 426 families were invited¹ with 322 of these consenting (76%) and of those consenting, 318 provided Time 1 data (99%), and 180 (57%) completed both Time 1 and Time 2 data.

Study Phase B (Qualitative interviews): 30 families who have previously participated in a Sing&Grow program and consented to be contacted about future research opportunities, were approached to participate in a face to face or telephone interview. Eighteen families consented with the first 10 families to respond

¹ There are some groups with missing data on number invited.

interviewed. Participants could choose to do either an online video interview via Zoom or a telephone interview. Most participants consented to do a telephone interview, with many citing poor internet connections as a reason for doing so. Participants were asked if they would agree to the interview being recorded.

3.2 Data collection and measures

Study Phase A (quantitative):

Participants' socio-demographic information was collected via a parent and child details survey which is a requirement of participation in the Sing&Grow program. Participants were asked to consent to sharing information from this form with the research team for this project.

A pre-post survey of parenting self-efficacy, responsiveness, use of music and children's self-regulation was used at pre (time 1-week 1 of program) and post (time 2-final week of the program). The survey had a total of 29 items relating to parenting self-efficacy, responsiveness and use of music, each on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree and was developed from the following measures. There were an additional 34 items relating to children's self-regulation on a 5-point Likert scale from not true to very true.

- a) **Parenting self-efficacy** was measured with 20 items across three subscales of the *Self-Efficacy in Parenting Tasks Index* (van Rijen, Gasanova, Boonstra, & Huijding, 2014). Subscales include nurturance (e.g. "I am able to sense when my child is starting to become distressed"), discipline (e.g. "I have trouble getting my child to listen to me"), and play (e.g. "I can always think of something to play with my child"). These three subscales map well on to the three key parent messages conveyed in the Sing&Grow program of praise (aligned with nurturance), consistency (aligned with discipline), and play. The measure has been identified as responsive enough to show intervention change, and has strong psychometric properties (Wittkowski et al., 2017). This scale is appropriate for use from when children are 13 months of age and so in the findings section we include in analysis only those families with a child attending Sing&Grow of 13 months or older.
- b) **Responsive parenting** was measured with the responsiveness scale of the *Preschool Parenting Measure* (Sessa, Avenevoli, Steinberg, & Morris, 2001) which includes 4 items (e.g. "I talk to or hold my child when she is scared"). The scale has been shown to have adequate psychometric properties (Sessa et al., 2001). This scale has previously been used from when children are 4 years of age but face validity suggests the items are appropriate from at least 2 years of age and so in the findings section we include in analysis only those families with a child attending Sing&Grow of 24 months or older.
- c) **Use of home music activities** was measured with the Parent Initiation of Singing subscale of the *Music@Home scale* for infants (Politimou, Stewart, Mullensiefen, & Franco, 2018) 4 items (e.g. "I sing about daily routines"). This aligns well with the music therapy approach taken by Sing&Grow which aims to build capacity in parents to use singing as a parenting tool in the home. The scale has been shown to have adequate psychometric properties (Politimou et al., 2018). This scale was

designed to be used for infants from 3 months of age and so in the findings section we include in analysis only those families with a child attending Sing&Grow of 3 months or older.

- d) **Child participant's self-regulation** was measured through parent report on three subscales of the *Child Self-Regulation and Behaviour Questionnaire (CSBQ)* (Howard & Melhuish, 2016). The CSBQ is a 33-item educator-report (or parent-report) questionnaire that yields subscales of Cognitive Self-Regulation, Behavioural Self-Regulation, and Emotional Self-Regulation, as well as Sociability, Prosocial Behaviour, Externalizing Problems, and Internalizing Problems. This scale is appropriate for use from when children are 24 months of age and so in the findings section we include in analysis only those families with a children attending Sing&Grow of 24 months or older.

Parent satisfaction survey. This is standard data and required data collection for Sing&Grow. When consenting to be involved in the research, participants provided consent to share this information with the research team. Brief survey items ask about parents' overall satisfaction with the program and perceived benefits of attending.

Study Phase B: Qualitative narrative inquiry

Narrative methods of data generation focus on the lived experiences of participants, in this case, individuals' participation in the Sing&Grow program with their children. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants, via telephone or Zoom, asking a series of questions related to the experience of attending the Sing&Grow program. The questions (see Appendix 1) were aimed at eliciting responses about parental perceptions of the Sing&Grow program including the reasons for attending, the perceived benefits for their children and themselves, things they liked about the program and whether they would recommend the program to others. Pseudonyms and deidentification ensured that participant identities remained confidential and anonymous.

3.3 Data Analysis

Study Phase A: Quantitative surveys

Analysis of the parent report survey involved data cleaning, descriptive statistics and paired t-tests for pre-post changes across time.

Study Phase B: Qualitative interviews

Immediately after each interview, the researcher made notes on the interview, specifically about perceived demeanour of the participant and the interview situation. While visual cues were not possible in the telephone interviews, tone of voice and the manner in which words were uttered is of consequence. The audio files were immediately forwarded to the Lead Investigator to send to the transcribers. Once returned, the researcher went through each transcript, listening to the interview audio, and made any corrections.

Once completed, the researcher emailed each participant their transcript. Most transcripts were returned by participants promptly and without amendment. Firstly, each transcript was read through several times and coded separately to look for prominent themes following an inductive approach. The researcher placed responses to similar interview questions together. This was not systematic as the interviews followed a conversational style and as such, questions may have altered slightly depending on the previous responses from the participant. Key themes emerged from the data and these were interpreted and analysed by the researcher and were grouped together. The process of reading, coding and analysing was repeated until no new themes could be found. The themes were then grouped together forming the main study findings.

4. Study Phase A (Quantitative): Findings

4.1 Participants

Participants were from eight states and territories (Figure 1).

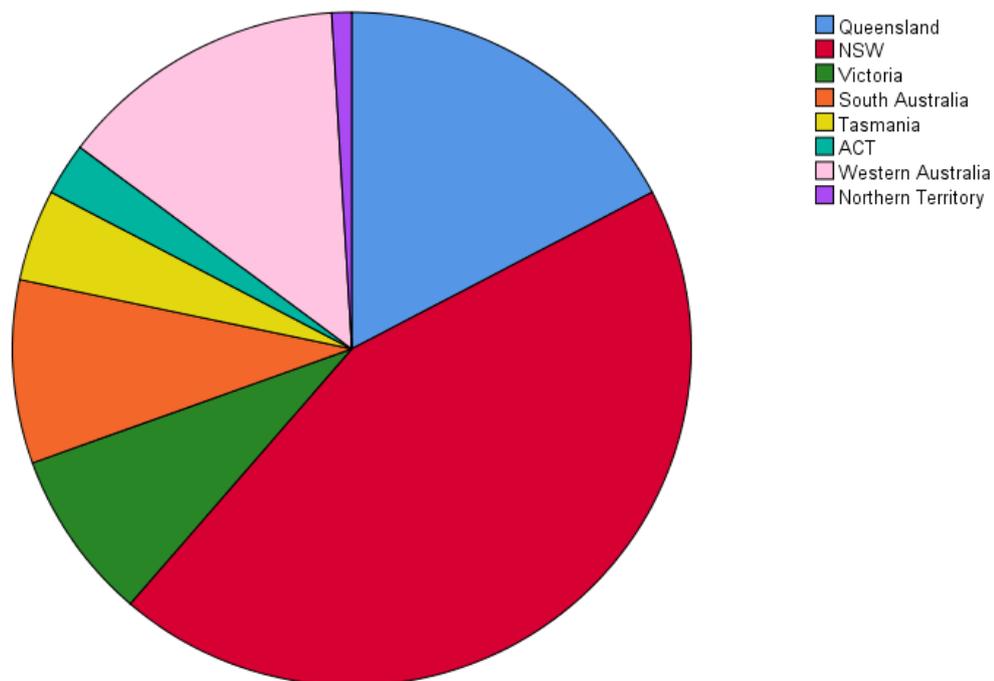


Figure 1 Distribution of participants across states and territories

Of the 318 consenting participants, 138 (43%) completed Time 1 data only, and 180 (57%) completed both Time 1 and Time 2 data. In Table 1, the socio-economic characteristics of these two groups of families is compared. Participants who completed both time points of data did not differ significantly from those who completed only the first time point of data across most characteristics with the exception of parent age. Parents who completed both time points of data were slightly older than those who did not complete both time points.

Note: For the parenting self-efficacy measures as described above, only children aged 13 months or older were included in analyses due to the nature of the measure. These were 230 (72%) of all consenting participants, with 99 (43% of sub sample 13 months or older) completing Time 1 data only, and 131 (57% of this sub sample) completing both Time 1 and Time 2 data.

For some child outcome measures as described above, and for parental responsiveness, only children aged 24 months or older were included in analyses due to the nature of these measures. These were 163 (51%) of all consenting participants, with 67 (41% of sub sample 24 months or older) completing Time 1 data only, and 96 (59% of this sub sample) completing both Time 1 and Time 2 data.

Table 1 Sample characteristics for those who completed Time 1 data and those that complete both Time 1 and Time 2 data

	Time 1 data only completed	Time 1 and Time 2 data completed	Significance	
	n = 138 ²	n = 180		
Age	M (SD)		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Child (months)	27.8 (16.53)	27.8 (15.79)	.00	.984
Parent (years)	32.69 (6.53)	35.64 (8.11)	10.54	.001
Child characteristics	n (%)		<i>Chi-square</i>	<i>p</i>
Female gender	69 (54)	87 (50)	1.95	.377
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	21 (16.8)	20 (11.6)	1.627	.234
Born overseas	8 (6.3)	11 (6.4)	.00	1.00
Non-English speaking home	13 (10.4)	23 (13.5)	.629	.475
Developmental disability	12 (9.8)	25 (14.6)	1.54	.432
Parent characteristics				
Female	120 (95.2)	163 (94.7)	.034	1.00
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	13 (10.6)	14 (8.3)	.451	.543
Born overseas	44 (35.2)	62 (36)	.023	.903
Non-English speaking home	21 (16.5)	27 (15.8)	.030	.875
Single parent	20 (22)	25 (19.8)	.180	.671
Main income from benefits or no income	33 (35.8)	38 (30)	.790	.374

Common languages spoken in family homes included Vietnamese, Urdu, Tamil, Chinese, and Arabic.

Common developmental delays for children reported by parents included speech and language delay and possible autism spectrum disorder.

4.2 Attendance

The number of sessions attended for each family ranged from 1 to 8 sessions. 53% of families attended 5 or fewer sessions (Table 2).

² Amount of complete data on each socio-demographic varied according to data completed by parents. Provided in this column are the valid responses and percentage of all available data on this variable.

Table 2 Sessions attended

Number of sessions attended	Number of families	%	Cumulative %
1	29	10.0	10.0
2	13	4.5	14.5
3	35	12.1	26.6
4	37	12.8	39.3
5	40	13.8	53.1
6	57	19.7	72.8
7	45	15.5	88.3
8	34	11.7	100.0
Total	290 ³	100.0	

4.3 Did the selected measures perform as expected?

Overall, yes, the measures performed well.

Parenting self-efficacy subscales of nurturance, discipline, and play performed well with internal reliability estimates (for those children aged 13 months or older) at each of Time 1 and Time 2 as:

- Nurturance (.85 and .82)
- Discipline (.76 and .71)
- Play (.79 and .79)

The Responsive parenting scale performed well with an internal reliability estimate of .88 at Time 1 and .83 at Time 2 for those children aged 24 months and older.

Use of home music activities measured through the singing subscale of the *Music@Home scale* for infants performed well with an internal reliability coefficient of .91 at Time 1 and Time 2 for those children aged 3 months and older.

Child participants self-regulation was measured through parent report on the *Child Self-Regulation and Behaviour Questionnaire* (CSBQ) (Howard & Melhuish, 2016) which yields seven subscales, with three related to self-regulation, two to behaviour problems, and two to social skills. The reliability estimates were adequate at each of Time 1 and Time 2 follows (for those children aged 24 months and older):

- Internalizing problems (.78 and .72),
- Externalizing problems (.74 and .80)
- Sociability (.85 and .84)
- Prosocial Behaviour (.76 and .77)
- Behavioural Self-Regulation (.71 and .79)
- Cognitive Self-Regulation (.73 and .78)
- Emotional Self-Regulation [with Item 14 removed] (.71 and .71)

³ There was missing attendance data for the remaining families.

4.4 Findings in relation to the key evaluation questions

Assertions below in relation to each of the research questions are drawn from data in Table 3

1. Do Sing&Grow parent participants report increased parenting self-efficacy over time?

Yes, there are small but statistically significant improvements in the parenting self-efficacy scales of discipline and play, but no change over time in nurturance at the group level (children aged > 12 months). However, there was a high overall mean (31 out of a possible 35) for nurturance at Time 1 meaning many parents had limited room for growth to Time 2 on this measure. A subset of participants who scored below the mean at Time 1 were examined (n = 57), and for these parents, there was statistically significant growth in nurturance self-efficacy from Time 1 to Time 2.

2. Do Sing&Grow parent participants report increased parenting responsiveness over time?

No, there was no significant difference over time in parent reports of responsiveness at the whole sample level (children aged > 24 months). However, there was a high overall mean (18 out of a possible 20) for parental responsiveness at Time 1 meaning many parents had limited room for growth to Time 2 on this measure. A subset of participants who scored below the mean at Time 1 were examined (n = 29), and for these parents, there was statistically significant growth in responsiveness from Time 1 to Time 2.

3. Do Sing&Grow parent participants report an increase in home uses of music with children?

Yes, there is a significant improvement in parents' use of singing at home at the composite score level. Each item of the five-item scale was also examined to provide additional detail and statistically significant improvements were found for each of the five items:

- I sing in playful contexts with my child everyday
- I sing several times a day with my child
- I teach my child new songs
- I sing in many different situations
- I sing about our daily routines

4. Do Sing&Grow child participants show improvements in parent-reported self-regulation over time?

Yes. There was a small statistically significant improvement in children's cognitive self-regulation as reported by parents over time across the whole sample (children aged > 24 months).

There were no significant changes in the other child outcomes measured through parent report at the whole group level. However, for each construct, the subsample of children who began with scores below the mean for that measure at Time 1 were examined. This showed for these children, statistically significant growth to Time 2 in:

- Behavioural self-regulation (n = 36)
- Sociability (n = 32)
- Prosocial (n = 35)

And a significant reduction in

- Internalizing problems for those that began with higher than average problems (n = 29)

Table 3 Results of pre-post t tests on outcome measures⁴

	Time 1 M (SD)	Time 2 M (SD)	<i>T</i>	<i>df</i> ⁵	<i>p</i>
Parenting self-efficacy					
Nurturance	31.18 (3.37)	31.56 (2.90)	-1.49	126	.140
Discipline	20.04 (4.17)	20.80 (4.10)	-2.26	121	.026
Play	26.85 (4.59)	27.71 (4.25)	-2.63	120	.010
Parenting Responsiveness	18.40 (1.91)	18.40 (1.80)	-.05	92	.959
Parent use of music at home	18.06 (4.59)	19.87 (4.43)	-6.34	158	.000
Child outcomes					
Internalising behaviour	1.58 (.65)	1.60 (.61)	-.44	85	.66
Externalising behaviour	2.23 (.72)	2.25 (.83)	-.23	83	.82
Sociability	3.71 (.87)	3.76 (.81)	-.88	79	.38
Prosocial behaviour	3.78 (.70)	3.82 (.68)	-.73	86	.46
Behavioural self-regulation	3.57 (.70)	3.63 (.74)	-.98	84	.33
Cognitive self-regulation	3.46 (.77)	3.62 (.75)	-2.40	84	.02
Emotional self-regulation	3.52 (.77)	3.56 (.76)	-.54	86	.59

⁴ Shaded rows indicate statistically significant results.

⁵ *df* + 1 = the number of families included in analysis for this variable because of complete data available and children being of the appropriate age for the measure used.

4.5 Parent satisfaction and feedback

Data on parent feedback forms to date shows that:

- 100% agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the program and with staff,
- 97.6% agreed or strongly agreed to the statement that staff understood the needs of their family.
- 97% agreed or strongly agreed that participating had helped them learn new ways to play with their child.
- 91.7% agreed or strongly agreed that the program had helped them to feel more confident as a parent.

Parents were also asked to rate a series of statements on a 5-point scale from 1 = sounds nothing like me to 5 = sounds exactly like me. Below, response scores of 4 or 5 are grouped together to indicate percentage of high agreement with statements.

- 89.3% indicated they felt more confident to participate in other parenting support or parent-child programs.
- 85.2% indicated they had learned more about child development.
- 78.7% indicated they felt more connected with other parents.

5. Study Phase B (Qualitative) findings

The interview study aimed to answer the key research question “How do past participants describe the impact of Sing&Grow on their family and their child’s transition to school?” In this section, the interview participants are described and then the findings are presented in the following sections: the ways in which Sing&Grow assisted mothers to meet the challenges of parenting; the positive attributes of the program according to parents; the perceived benefits for parents and children; and overall perceptions about the program including areas that parents perceive enhance the program or areas where the program might be improved. Two case stories are then presented followed by a summary of the qualitative findings.

Participants came from different Australian states and are described in Table 4. The largest number of participants came from New South Wales in the Sydney area. The one participant who currently lives in Queensland, attended the Sing&Grow program in Tasmania. Among the mothers, two explicitly stated that their children had additional needs, one with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and one who was ‘selectively mute’ and under the diagnosis process. One mother had twins. Two families had attended the program twice and one family was about to attend for the third time. Two mothers commented that they were ‘older’ mums, being in their forties, with one mother stating she was in her late forties.

Table 4 Interview participant information

Participant	State where currently resides	Child/ren ages – when participated in Sing&Grow (ages now)	Duration of program attendance	Date when participated in Sing&Grow	Referral pathway to Sing&Grow	Transitioned to formal schooling
1	VIC	18 months ; 2 & 4 years (3 and 5 years)	Two x 8-week programs	Early and mid 2018	Local community centre; direct contact	Commenced school 2019, attended Sing&Grow six months earlier
2	VIC	3 months, 2 & 3.5 years (18mths, 3.5, 5)	One term	Early 2018	Mother from mother's group passed on flyer	Commenced school 2019, attended Sing&Grow nine months earlier
4 ⁶	NSW	3.5 years (4.5yrs and 12 months)	Two terms (soon to commence 3 rd term)	Mid 2018 Mid 2019 (3 rd)	Hub advisor – playgroup/school	No
6	NT	10-12 weeks (10 months)	8-10 weeks	Early 2019	Family centre co-ordinator.	No
7	TAS	3 years (3 years)	8 weeks	Early 2019	Local community group Facebook site	No
8	QLD	3 months (12 months)	10 weeks (in Tasmania)	Late 2018	Through child and family centre	No
9 ^{6,7}	NSW	5 years (6 years)	8 weeks	Late 2018	Local community group offered program to school	Commenced school 2019, attended Sing&Grow (Off to School program) three months earlier
10	NSW	4 - 5 months old (2yrs 3 mths)	6 weeks	Mid 2017	Local mother's group posted on Facebook site	No
11	NSW	18 months (19 months)	1 term	Early 2019	Through local charity playgroup	No
14	NSW	5 months (twins) (2.5 years)	6 weeks	Mid 2017	Local community group Facebook site	No

Many of the participants commented that they lived in flats or units and how that contributed to the need to get out and do things.

All but one family attended when their children were under four years of age. One family attended the Sing&Grow transition to school program. Some participants had attended the program over two years ago and commented how it was difficult to

⁶ Shaded participants are used as case studies later in this evaluation study

⁷ Participant 9 participated in the Sing&Grow *Off to School* program

remember specifics of the experience. Other participants had completed the program within the last six months.

5.1 Helping to meet the challenges of motherhood

Many mothers articulated the challenges of motherhood. The participants in the study were all mothers and primary caregivers for their children. Some worked part-time and others were stay-at-home mothers. Mothers expressed that they often felt isolated, sometimes not knowing anyone that lived in their immediate area and they did not have close family living nearby. Mothers commented that they did not know what to do with their babies, and how the days were blurred into constant care work routines of feeding, changing and sleeping. Mothers also spoke of how they were unsure of their babies' capabilities. They expressed anxiety about going out with their babies, fitting in with others' expectations and how they might cope in new situations in a group of new people. Being out of their "comfort-zone" was an oft-used phrase the mothers used in the interviews when asked about trying Sing&Grow initially:

It can be quite daunting going into something I'm sort of not used to it at all. ...yeah, new surroundings, and new parents and new expectations, I guess. (P7)

For some mothers, it was not only going out with a young child into unfamiliar surroundings that made them uncomfortable, having to actively participate, or perform, with a group of "strangers" was something they were unaccustomed to, as P6 explains:

I got there the first time round and as a first-time participant, everyone knows the words to the songs, everyone knows all the tunes ... and you're like, "I don't know what I'm doing." So, it was pretty nerve wracking when I first went along. (P6)

P6 commented that after the initial hesitation, she "had a ball". This was reiterated by other mothers in their interviews.

Mothers stated that Sing&Grow, provided an impetus to get out of the house for a regular time each week. One mother commented how it gave her some structure. This is a difficult time for primary caregivers particularly if they have previously been active in the workforce or had busy lives before having children.

I know he was quite young, but that's kind of when you're most vulnerable in terms of being isolated because your partner has gone back to work ... you knew you had to be somewhere, and you were going to get something out of it. So, it was just lovely. (P10)

As the effort to attend Sing&Grow with the children was often significant, the perceived benefits of attending needed to outweigh the effort. Mothers often did not persevere with activities that they felt were not beneficial, that they felt they

could do themselves at home, or were stressful to attend or get to. Two mothers interviewed explained their reasoning, firstly P14 and then P7 who had attended another music-based class prior to Sing&Grow:

"Oh come to a baby's play group," but all you do is just sit there and do nothing. ... we did go to another one that was like that, I was like, "Oh, I could just do this at home." (P14)

I think there was about three younger children in the class. Little, maybe 12 months old, just being held ... it was sort of cold and not very welcoming ... And also the cost ... there was no value in it ... I could have found better value somewhere else. (P7)

5.2 Positive attributes of the Sing&Grow program according to parents

Mothers saw the Sing&Grow program as an overwhelmingly positive experience. They commented on the small group sizes and the suitability for multi-age groups (for example, mothers could take their toddler and also their baby).

I think it was really good that they kept the numbers down as well because once you start filling a class like that, you know with 30 people, that's when you don't really get much out of because it's too crazy. (P14)

P2 appreciated that she could bring her newborn baby along as well; she felt included.

Many saw the Sing&Grow clinician as a key feature of the program with some mothers citing other programs they had tried where facilitators lacked the skills they felt necessary for the running of a successful session. Facilitator qualities that were valued included those who were engaging, enthusiastic and passionate about their work. Parents used words like *patient*, *calm* and *lovely* to describe their Sing&Grow facilitators. Mothers felt that the facilitators were approachable and sought advice from them. They thought the facilitators were professional in their attitude, inclusive and equitable. The mothers believed the facilitators to be genuinely interested in them, speaking to each family individually each week. Some mothers liked the fact that the facilitators were not "*too precious*" about the instruments and allowed children to use them freely without too many restrictions.

[She] was very well suited to the program because ... she was very patient, very calm, but she's had this really sort of soothing nature about her which all the kids really responded to. (P6)

He was talking personally to each one of us as well. I think mine [child] maybe was the youngest, so he would tell me what to do at home, what to try at home. (P8)

Mothers saw the facilitator as a fundamental person to the success of the program. The parents were discerning, and some had had negative experiences at other children's activities where they considered facilitators not as child-centred:

I ... tried to find sort of private other sort of music classes that you had to pay for. One ... was too structured and too rigid. He just didn't like it because she'd be snatching the instrument away from him when that set instrument was finished. So, there wasn't that kind of appreciation that he's just a baby type thing. (P10)

and in one case, a Sing&Grow facilitator:

It does depend on the person who is presenting of course, and yes [the facilitator], fantastic. She just knew what she was doing ... I did hear a mum that had a Sing&Grow teacher before [facilitator] and ... the other teacher wasn't as sort of vibrant ... that would make ... a very big difference. (P4)

Having the CD was also seen as a great addition to the program because it assisted parents to continue the activities at home. It gave parents confidence and revived memories of happy experiences.

It was really good to have the CD to reinforce it when we got home ... Pop it on. I think it was quite comforting because it was so familiar to them and was a happy experience. (P7)

The mother of the child who did the "Off to school" transition program, commented that they did not use the CD because they already had an established repertoire of songs that they listened to.

5.3 Benefits for parents from Sing&Grow participation

From the mothers' interviews, some prominent themes regarding the perceived benefits for the parents and their children emerged. While it was important for the mothers to see that their child was getting something out of the program, it was also important that they derived something positive from it too. For many this was perceived as a "*bonus*" (P9).

Social benefits

For many parents, the program offered an opportunity to have a social time with other parents. Early motherhood was often a time when mothers felt isolated and overwhelmed. Being with the same group of parents each week established relationships through familiarity and an understanding that they were all going through a similar thing. This assisted mothers to feel supported. In this way, the program engendered a sense of belonging which enhanced mothers' feelings of confidence and self-worth:

It was the social aspect for me as well. So, I got to see my mum friends, too. (P1)

I met a few mums with their kids and that was very important too, especially at first stage. So, we were always the same group each week. (P8)

Challenges in parenting continue to arise as children approach new milestones. As children got older, parents were apprehensive when their children were transitioning to a new stage, in this case going to school. Connecting with other parents in similar circumstances offered assurance:

the social side of it can't be underestimated ... all of us started a Facebook group and then we invited the other parents in and we've ended up as a really close knit group where all the parents are connected ... And it all came out of that Sing&Grow program. (P9)

Again, the consistency of the group for the duration of the program helped to establish relationships between the parents and developed confidence between them enough to continue regular contact after the program had ceased.

Learning about child development

It was clear from parents' narratives that they felt overwhelmed by parenthood and often did not know how to interact with their children, particularly when their children were very young. Participation in the program assisted parents to learn about child development, including what their child was capable of, what to expect from them socially, emotionally and behaviourally, how to encourage language development, and to see how their child behaves in a situation away from the home environment. This developed capacity in the parents, enhancing their confidence and self-efficacy.

Because as a first mum, I actually didn't know how you can entertain your baby at the beginning ... I could see him developing every week something different ... I just could see how fast he could learn even though he was sort of little. (P8)

Parents commented that some teachers taught these things explicitly while some parents suggested more explicit teaching of the benefits of particular activities for child development would be worthwhile.

I think, yeah, maybe outline the absolute benefits of music or make them more known and sort of push that more to the front a little bit, so you think "Oh, geez, my child just sat in the corner and faced the other way". Even though that's not always a bad thing because they're still listening. (P7)

This suggests that parents would value more information about the benefits derived from each activity. Many parents found it hard to articulate the value of the program, particularly for them personally. Some saw the program as a music program primarily and the other benefits, for example social skills such as turn-taking that occurred, as incidental. Sing&Grow as a program to develop lifelong skills in all developmental areas and promote parenting skills through music was not cognisant by some. As commented on by P7, it might be useful to explain what is happening when children appear not to be listening or behaving in certain ways that might seem contrary to what is being expected. Being more explicit about the rationale behind each activity would increase parental understanding and knowledge of child development and parenting techniques. Arming parents with improved understanding may encourage parents to use the activities more extensively outside of the session.

Learning new parenting approaches and tools

One of the major benefits that parents reported was the integration of Sing&Grow activities into their family life which assisted with parenting. Music was utilised to assist with routines including packing away, changing and bathing, and also to mediate moods. Music became a tool for distracting children for a variety of situations such as when they were feeling upset:

if she's having a really bad day ... and something like changing a nappy is just the hardest task in the world, I use those songs and I'll sing them to her and ... she just chills out. (P6)

When he makes a mess I'll just start going, pack, pack, pack away and your toys, and then he'll start singing that and then he'll pack it away. (P10)

Creativity, musical skills and confidence are all things that parents felt they have developed while participating in the Sing&Grow program. Through the program, parents felt that they were more capable and were subsequently willing to try new activities that were unfamiliar previously.

Just being a bit more creative. I'm not very creative so ... it helped me give them ... some ideas and ... different things to do on rainy days. (P1)

It did give me a bit of confidence even to try those other things ... I was like, "Well, we'll try it again, see how we go." (P14)

Quality family time

The parents justified their attendance at Sing&Grow as quality time with some mothers reporting that they had attended other activities but not continued because it was not worthwhile and not a good use of their time. Sing&Grow was perceived as a valid way to spend time because it was an enjoyable experience for both parent

and child and had social and educational affordances, thereby alleviating maternal guilt about not being at home doing the domestic chores or going out doing other activities that were not considered child-centred.

There was just the moment you could share with the kids. You sit down on the mat and with an hour just to engage with them without any sort of outside distraction. Don't need to put out the washing, someone didn't call on the phone. It was just, yeah, good to sort of spend an hour there to be - present - in the group. (P1)

Enhanced family relationships

Some participants commented on the way Sing&Grow influenced family activities, and how activities became inculcated into everyday family life. The value of Sing&Grow is passed on to partners and siblings to enhance family interactions. Stronger bonding between primary caregiver and child, more positive sibling relationships and improved and more purposeful interactions with close family members other than the primary caregiver were cited as affordances. Mothers' reported improvements in relationships between siblings or father and child also had the effect of making mothers happier because the home environment is more positive overall:

It taught me ... how music could be sort of like a bonding thing with him ... the first day the instructor said - they don't care what your voice sounds like, they just want to hear your voice. So, I think that's reinforced to me ... So, I think that was sort of one of the bigger lessons. (P8)

The elder one is also learning ... when the elder one is singing rhymes, the little one listens to him, "okay, he is saying something, which I know." (P11)

My other half ... just the manliest man ... is not the type to sing at all. And I've got him singing the Sing&Grow songs to her ... So, it's helped with their relationship, you know, in little ways as well as mine. (P6)

In demonstrating simple activities that parents can take into their home lives, the Sing&Grow program promotes child-parent bonding which alleviates parental stress and increases parents' self-efficacy.

Validation and normalisation of parenting experiences and children's development

The sessions provided an opportunity for the parents to assess how their child was doing in comparison to other children. This was not seen in a competitive sense but rather as a way of 'normalising' their child's behaviour which served to alleviate their own anxiety about their children and subsequently, their parenting. Fears were allayed when mothers could see that their children were socialising with other

children, participating appropriately and enjoying the class. There was also an acceptance that there were variances in children's behaviour and that this was 'normal'.

I found it really positive at that time. I felt like it gave me a just a little bit more purpose with them. Because otherwise you get that guilt, like I'm meeting their needs but I'm not really doing much more with them right now. I'm not really ... like I'm talking to them as I'm doing things, but they're not doing anything fun ... (P14)

For P2, whose son was under the process of diagnosis for his additional needs, attendance at Sing&Grow helped to show that her child was capable and was accepted in that space. This gave the mother a sense of belonging and support during a time that was difficult, not knowing why her son was not always participating like the other children in the group.

The parents valued the accepting nature of the Sing&Grow program, its child-centred focus and flexible approach. Children were understood to be in an environment where they were there to learn and participate, and that skill and relationship development takes time and practice. There was a tacit understanding that all children are unique and learn in myriad ways. The facilitators understood that chastising children for non-compliance or non-participation can often be counter-productive, and so demonstrated other ways of encouraging children to participate actively and appropriately.

If any of the children ran around, there was no issues or dramas, they came back and sat in the circle when they were ready. So there was no pressure ... you could see the kids that weren't participating, they were just sitting quietly, but they were singing the songs or they were up walking around where sometimes they just watched and learnt. (P7)

Even when the other babies were crying and disruptive, it was all part of the territory. (P10)

5.4 Benefits for children from Sing&Grow participation

In line with the need for validation, parents could see the benefits for their children, which also justified why they attended. The perceived benefits according to the parents included **socialisation, developing an appreciation for music, development of fine and gross motor skills, language and communication skills, self-regulation, confidence in a group setting, and learning about the expectations of others such as listening and following instructions and adjusting to a new routine**. Many of the skills mentioned are important for **school readiness**. One participant described Sing&Grow as an "all-round experience".

He has already learnt lot of rhymes and social skills. It will help him get along with people, build a social bonding, makes as a step to

communication, physical and emotional skills. ... He is showing lot of confidence in building the social relationship now. (P11)

Just being around different people and having some different rules ... Even though he didn't always do it, it was the start of a little bit of structure ... it taught him that he had to sometimes sit still and listen and participate, and let other children have a turn. (P7)

It is clear that the parents saw that the program had potential affordances for more formal learning environments in their children's futures, be it pre-school or formal schooling. The parents showed an awareness that well-developed self-regulation is needed to succeed in a classroom setting, that is, how important it is for their child to be able to listen and follow instructions from other adults and follow a set routine. Sing&Grow was setting their children up for success for the future. These developments were easier for parents to understand as they could see the improvements directly.

Transition to school

The eldest children of three of the families in the interview study had transitioned to school (P1, P2 and P9). One family (P9) had attended the specific "Off to School" Sing&Grow transition program and could not speak highly enough about the program. For the parent, the 8-week program provided an opportunity for their child to meet his school peers, the school staff and get used to the school environment. The sessions incorporated information and activities about the school day, what to expect and how to deal with these issues. There was a 'homework' booklet to complete each week. The program assisted the child who subsequently felt comfortable in their new school environment but also mediated parental anxiety by showing them that their child had the necessary skills to succeed in school in those early days.

So, by the time school rocked round, I was very comfortable ... I got to see him participate in classroom things like putting his hand up and answering questions and I was like, oh my gosh he's so fine, I really don't need to worry. Which meant I went into kindergarten⁸ going he's fine. (P9)

This participant stated that the greatest benefit to the program was the confidence it developed in her son. She contradicts her previous statement by saying that her child did not learn anything per se, perhaps suggesting that the "counting or hygiene or lunch boxes" were all things her son was familiar with already. For the mother, the familiarity with the new school environment was the key attribute of the Sing&Grow experience, meaning her son was "ready to learn":

⁸ Kindergarten is the first year of formal schooling in New South Wales. (In other Australian states, kindergarten is a pre-school year that is the year prior to formal schooling.)

It's made them very comfortable in the environment, which I think makes it easier for them to learn ... Yeah, I actually think that that was the greatest thing. I don't think he learned anything per se ... he was more ready to learn and there were less emotions with starting school because he was already used to going there. (P9)

P9 had continued the relationship with the school, volunteering in the classroom on a regular basis. She has seen how well the children who participated in the Sing&Grow transition program have continued to flourish in the school environment. She has established positive relationships with the class teachers.

P9 shared a story about another child in the group and her successful transition to school via participation in the Sing&Grow program:

There was one girl there who was incredibly shy, spent two weeks wrapped around her dad's leg and by the time it came to the first day of kindergarten she walked into the class by herself. And each week you could see her get more confident ... And so, for a really shy kid, Sing&Grow was amazing. (P9)

However, the other two parents who attended Sing&Grow when their children were much younger, could not definitively say that Sing&Grow helped their child's transition to school, although they showed some cognisance of possible benefits:

Maybe the music aspect. She likes performing arts ... she's always singing and dancing around here ... But the school is very small, so they get a bit more individual attention from the teachers ... But I can't really say if it's impacted directly. (P1)

Look, we're having our issues but ... yeah like, we're sort of ... (hesitation) ... At the moment they think he's on the spectrum, but we haven't got an official diagnosis. (P2)

P1 commented that she forgot many of the Sing&Grow activities once they stopped attending the classes and she found it hard to attribute any of the benefits of the program to her daughter's school transition, remaining focussed on the music aspect of it. Her daughter did attend day care two days a week prior to attending school. Similarly, P2's attention is on her son who is showing delayed development in some areas and his transition to school has been impacted by this. However, P2 commented on the benefits for her child from attending:

Child care were saying he was selectively mute because he wasn't talking at all to anyone else but family members, but yet he would sing in front of people ... it was really good, the music of it ... he could have to sing in front of people, just not talk. So, it was a good activity for him to do obviously. (P2)

5.5 Other parental perceptions related to the Sing&Grow program

There were three main ideas and two minor comments that stemmed from the conversations with the mothers about possible improvements to the way that Sing&Grow is currently run. It is acknowledged that the program runs slightly differently depending on who is running it and the families attending.

Additional 'staff' member to assist

Many mothers commented on the benefits of having an **additional 'staff' member present during the sessions**. This extra person was usually employed by the local community centre who was hosting the program. The benefits of this extra person were that they were often familiar to the mothers as someone they had met through playgroup, which gave a familiar face when they felt anxious in attending Sing&Grow in the first instance. During the program, the extra person helped mothers with managing their children when they were attending with two or more.

Not the lady that ran it, but there was another lady there ... helping all us mums with the babies. ... So, the lady running it obviously just kept running it, but then there was that extra set of hands and she'd run around and hold a baby or help you adjust and give you a hand to get things, which is really good. (P14)

Additional social time after session

The mothers highly valued **being able to share time with the other parents either before or after class**. Some of the centres provided a morning tea after the session which gave the parents an opportunity to chat with each other, develop friendships and really socialise.

Afterwards the family centre coordinator would put on ... some fresh fruit and everything there was time for the mums with sort of the little, littler ones to hang out inside still and just have a chat. (P6)

For some groups, they continued their own social contact after the Sing&Grow program ended:

after the six-week program we ended up still just sort of coming ... to the same area, there's a park across the road ... So, we continued it a little bit ... ourselves just for a bit, which was nice. (P14)

Increasing duration of the program

Many of the mothers spoke about the **duration of the program** and how they would have liked it to have continued beyond the 6 - 10 weeks it had been offered. Although all the participants in this study received the program for free, many stated that they would be willing to pay for such a program.

I would have liked to do it again, at other times ... I liked that it was you know, a regular thing. Of course, I would've loved if it kept going for another year. (P14)

Participating in the Sing&Grow program gave parents the confidence to try other activities that they could do with their children. Parents became active seekers of other things to do with their children which they may not have done had they not participated in a positively received program such as Sing&Grow. These parents have become advocates for such child-centred music programs because they have seen the benefits first hand.

Two additional comments also arose from the interviews:

Highlighting who Sing&Grow is for

A couple of the mothers commented that they would have liked sessions to be in more narrowly defined age groups. For P7, her child was an older child within a class with mainly younger children. There was an inference that her child might have benefit more had he been in a group with older children where he could have been challenged more or at least with similarly aged peers where he could see age-appropriate behaviour.

I would've liked to have seen older kids. It would seem to be very popular with the younger age groups. So, the 12 months, not older, sort of two or three year olds, I guess they're out doing other things. (P7)

P6, who attended when her child was three months old, wondered if it might have been more beneficial for her child to attend the class now that she is perceived as more physically and mentally capable. However, her involvement in the program was initiated by a community member who advocated the value of music and movement activities for developing very young brains, and it is arguable if one particular time is better than others for learning, as this parent's practice using these activities in her home life commenced earlier and continued thereby establishing the benefits earlier.

These comments are in contrast to those parents who stated that they appreciated being able to bring all their children to the same class. Participants 6 and 7 have only one child each and may not be aware of the difficulties in finding care for siblings. It is common for children's formal activities, such as paid music classes, to have narrower age bands for attendance and siblings are not allowed to attend after a certain age. This prevents many families from accessing these classes.

There was a perception by some that the program was only for very young children:

I think it is only for the less than two years old. (P11)

If I saw a flyer come up or whatever, I would actually pass it on to either the health nurse or I'd pass it on to someone in a Facebook group that I'm on. Or if I know someone that has younger kids, or if it was zero to three, I'd take the girls back. (P14)

Benefits to school teachers from the Sing&Grow “Off to school” transition program

The one parent who had attended the Sing&Grow transition program relayed information from her child’s classroom teacher (first year of school) about their perceptions of the children who had participated. The parent explained how her son was attending a small Catholic school whereas most of the others in his pre-school class were attending the local state school. The parent commented that information and enrolment regarding the course was in a short timeframe, and fortunately fell on the one day she was not working.

he went to a school where he knew no one, so to have the opportunity to meet other kids, with a parent there and that slower introduction ... the teachers ... said we've never had a kindergarten class where no one cries. ... They're experienced teachers ... they're hoping to do it again. (P9)

In addition to the benefits perceived by the parent were significant benefits attributed to the course from the school kindergarten teachers who felt that the children who had attended the Sing&Grow “Off to school” program settled into school extremely well. Being more ‘ready’ for kindergarten meant that children were confident to leave their parent, keen to meet the challenges of school encompassing learning new things, listening and taking instructions from the class teacher, comfortable with the daily routine, they knew where the toilets were and how to independently manage self-care. Even though only half the kindergarten class of children had attended the program, teachers believed there was a knock-on effect, that is, by having half the class familiar and comfortable with the school environment, the remaining children also felt happier and more settled.

The impact was incredible because half of the kindergarten class knew each other by the time kindergarten rolled around and the school said it's the first time they've had no tears in kindergarten ... half the class had this confidence and familiar ... with the environment and each other. And that just passed onto the other eight ... the teacher actually commented ... "I've never had such a settled kindergarten class. It was the first time they've run any sort of transition program." (P9)

5.6 Case stories

Having a child with additional needs - Anita

Anita is a trained primary teacher and trained singer, but currently a stay-at-home mother to two boys, the eldest of whom has autism. Anita says, *“I took leave from my job to help him with his speech, so I'm with him all the time”*. Anita has participated in the Sing&Grow program three times, the first two times with her eldest boy only. Her first time at Sing&Grow was before her son's diagnosis. Anita believed her son enjoyed music, as she does. A local community advisor had mentioned the Sing&Grow program, claiming it was *“really good”*.

Three to six months after their initial conversation, Anita received an email about a program fairly close by. Although not knowing his diagnosis at this stage, Anita realised her son had an expressive language disorder and thought, *“well he loves music, singing, let's give this a go”*.

Initially, the class was challenging for Anita and her son. He found it hard to follow instructions and seemed *“out of his comfort zone”* although he is very social, according to Anita. When asked about the program, Anita recalls,

*I was very impressed with how the program was run and how **professional, but very down to earth** ... I liked that we started the play at the beginning, so there was blocks and toys out before the actual Sing&Grow because it helps sort of get used to the environment before we're doing the music and socializing.*

Anita formed a strong connection with the facilitator of the sessions; it was someone who *“understood”* her situation:

*when I saw the paediatrician, and he'd said he suspects that Sam might be on his spectrum, it was helpful to be able to just run that by [facilitator]. She didn't really say, “Oh yes, I think he is too,” but just **to have someone to talk to** about that and know that she has a background in that ... at every single session, [she] was **interested** in hearing about Sam and I suppose the journey of his diagnosis.*

The experienced facilitator had a **child-centred approach** and **acknowledged that children have diverse needs**. Children were accepted as **individuals with unique skills and abilities** and this **normalised children's behaviour** in the circumstances creating a **sense of belonging**. The **inclusive** feel of the group was valued by Anita. She got out of the house and was able to **form connections** with other parents, although Anita said this did not extend beyond the program as she was too “busy”. The group was a **mixture of ages, cultures and abilities**

*they were all under school age, but some of them weren't walking yet, so some of them were under 12 months ... so there was definitely a **diverse age range** ... I think there was a dad that came along with a mum and ... the children were special needs ... **multicultural** ... and we would also finish off with like a morning tea, so we'd all bring a piece of fruit and then the children would all sit down ... [it] was a nice way of the mums sort of getting to have a casual chat with each other as well.*

Having morning tea is not part of the Sing&Grow program, however many groups who facilitate the program offer this to parents. Many parents in the study commented on how enjoyable and important this social time was to them for **building connections** with other parents. It helped parents to **informally discuss any parenting issues** or reflect upon the session. This was seen as a valuable add-on to the Sing&Grow experience.

The program helped Anita in myriad ways. At Sing&Grow, Anita and her son felt included. They were **active participants** in something they both enjoyed doing. Sam made **social connections** with the other children and **developed his language skills** in a fun way.

... during the Sing&Grow, it was so nice to see him singing and happy with other people around, so in a social scene ... So, with his language that was good. It made me happy to see him happy.

Sometimes, Anita had to remove Sam from the Sing&Grow space and help him to **regulate his behaviour**, as she explains, but she felt **comfortable** dealing with his behaviour in a **supported environment**.

He had to learn ... if he was having a meltdown, I took him out of the room and I'd say, "You need to behave yourself or we'll have to go home." ... he definitely wanted to be there, because then he'd pull himself together ... he learned that he needed to sit down in order to have a turn.

The program had meaning for Anita as she considers herself a musical person and she wanted her son **share her love of music** too. It was something Anita felt good about, her "creative outlet".

*music is a big part of my life, like I want Sam to let me sing, I want Sam to sing along, that's my creative outlet and I really miss it. Yeah, so getting back into singing in some form was really good. **That helped me.***

Sing&Grow provided **techniques for modifying her son's behaviour**. Through calming songs, Sam was able to **regulate his behaviour** and become calm. This created **happy memories** for Anita and Sam and boosted their enjoyment of the program.

There's a lot of feel good times. You see, Sam really loves bubbles ... and so [facilitator] would often do a [bubble] song ... That's a favourite memory because ... it's a calming song.

Anita was invited to attend Sing&Grow for a second term. This had benefits for her son who was already familiar with the repertoire:

*eventually by the term two, he knew the words to the songs. He was singing the hello song, and he was waving and when it came to his name ... he'd say Sam, and everyone would clap, because he said it really loud. He was smiley and **very joyful**.*

Anita was able to **see her son's progress**. In the first term, her son would become anxious when the instruments came out because of his sensory sensitivity, however, by the second term, having the instruments became a **positive experience** for him.

it was just a matter of trying to keep him calm while the instruments were coming out. And then eventually, by the second term, he was excited that the instruments were coming out.

Anita believes Sing&Grow helped **prepare** her son for **more formal learning experiences** like pre-school, familiarising him to a **more structured experience**. He is currently attending some introductory sessions at an occasional day care centre and has been left for four hours.

Anita is now attending Sing&Grow with Sam and her second child, who is 11 months old. This will be the third time for Sam. Before attending, she was concerned about how she might cope with two of them. At the Sing&Grow program she attends, the Centre organiser also attends to help out. Anita has seen the Centre organiser step in to help parents that need assistance and **feels confident** that she will help her too if she needs it.

I think there is a need in order for the singing program to run efficiently, that there is a Sing&Grow person and then there is an additional person ... But it's worth it, because if it wasn't, then [Sing&Grow facilitator] would be dealing with a lot more than just the music program ... It definitely makes a difference.

Anita emailed the researcher after she and the boys had started back at Sing&Grow. She was excited to share her news of their experience after the interview:

*I actually had Sing&Grow with both of my sons for the first time on Friday and it was **fantastic**. (Sam cried when it finished because he enjoyed it so much.) Since going to Sing&Grow last Friday I've been playing our Sing&Grow CD in the car. Sam is singing along and doing actions!!! [Youngest child] hasn't cried while it's on either so it could be helping with his travelling issues too. Happy days 😊*

Transition to school – Michelle

Michelle, married, is a mother of three children, the eldest – Ryan – has started his first year of formal schooling this year. Ryan, attended pre-school, but unlike most of his peers, he was enrolled to attend a nearby Catholic school, rather than the local public school. Michelle and her family were new to the school community. The local public school was “famous for” offering a good transition program for their prospective students, according to Michelle. She had heard how a good transition program can **help children to adjust to school** although she was unsure what such a program entailed.

A local community group offered to fund the Sing&Grow transition program for children attending the Catholic school and parents were sent emails to enrol. Attendance was optional; parents were only given a week’s notice before the program started. Fortunately, it was held on the only day of the week that Michelle did not work. The pre-school teacher commented how **beneficial** such programs could be, reinforcing Michelle’s decision to enrol. The sessions went for eight weeks in the term prior to school commencement and eight to ten children from the future kindergarten class of fifteen attended.

The benefits of participation in the program were threefold, according to Michelle. Firstly, the program made the children **comfortable in the school environment** because they were familiar with the physical surrounds and the school staff; secondly, the program **promoted confidence** in the children, by **knowing about school expectations** and promoting a **readiness to learn**; and thirdly, the program **developed pivotal social relationships**. Simultaneously, these affordances were also granted to Michelle.

Like many parents who are unfamiliar with the next stage in their child’s educational journey, Michelle was anxious about how her son would cope and fit in.

So, in the context of he is my first going to school, I think most parents get a bit nervous and so our anxiety actually can pass on to the kids.

Being engaged in the Sing&Grow program along with her son, Michelle **developed confidence** seeing how her son participated in the group with other children he was initially unfamiliar with. While Michelle understood her son to be a confident boy, she was **reassured** by seeing how he interacted in the group in these new surrounds:

My son is quite confident ... anyway ... I was amazed to watch how much he participated in the ... groups.

*I ended up **feeling so comfortable**, I knew the teachers, I knew exactly where everything was in the school ... Which meant I went into kindergarten going he's fine.*

Michelle believed the program would **reduce her son's anxiety** about starting school, as it had her:

*It reduced the initial anxiety of starting in a new place [where] none of the kids knew each other ... where you ended up with eight kids that knew each other and were really quite **comfortable and confident** ... The way they felt seems to have spread to the other kids. And so, they haven't had any behaviour issues or attention issues.*

Michelle attributes anxiety as one of the causes of behavioural and attentional issues.

*It's made them very **comfortable in the environment** ... Which means he was **more ready to learn** and there were **less emotions** with starting school because he was already used to going there.*

The benefits of being relaxed in the school environment meant that her son was 'ready to learn', says Michelle, without any of the other emotions, such as anxiety, getting in the way. She mentions how the feelings of **confidence and comfort** transferred to the other children who did not do the program.

Michelle also liked how the program introduced the children to the **expectations of school** in a fun and engaging way:

*like they have to sit down and listen ... The girl that ran it, she was so good with her guitar, she could sing anything. And so, Ryan came away like wanting to go to school ... I think each week there was a different topic, like counting or hygiene or lunch boxes or, but she made it really **fun**.*

Ryan eagerly completed the weekly homework book

He loved it. He would bring his little workbook home and do it. They had to draw pictures and things.

The **social connections** afforded through engagement in the program were a major bonus for Michelle and she could not speak highly enough of the **reassurance** it gave her to be **familiar with other parents and children** within the class:

*in terms of **social connections** ... I think helps the kids **feel comfortable** because you know we all chat after school or go and have play dates ... it just makes everyone **feel part of the school community** ... Because they're learning from you, if they see you feeling comfortable and being part of the schools and they're like, "Oh this is what I do."*

The affordances extended beyond Michelle's family and new friends but into the school community too. Michelle **established relationships** with the school principal who visited during the transition program several times. Importantly, the kindergarten class teachers commented how they had not had a class that seemed so settled:

"We've never had a kindergarten class where no one cries".

I think the principal was really impressed, so she was keen. She was the one that jumped on the opportunity ... The teachers have commented how much they've got the kids more ready for kindergarten ... Well, they didn't have tears. If you've got a happy kindergarten class, you're a big step ahead.

Similarly, Michelle's **confidence** in the school environment was comfortable enough that she now **regularly volunteers** in the kindergarten class that her son is a part of. She maintains the benefits of the transition program are still evident and **reflects positively** on the program:

*I've just done a term volunteering with them in the school and they're a **really cohesive** class ... It feels like they've got **a head start in kindergarten** ... And I think we often underestimate the emotions when we put kids into a new environment that takes them a while to adjust, where these kids didn't need that because they'd already had the Sing&Grow program and they just went straight into kinder, like it was really a **smooth transition**.*

5.7 Summary of Qualitative findings

The final comments sum up the feelings of the parents on the Sing&Grow program as a whole:

But by the end of it, it was so nice to be able to socialize with other mums and it's nice watching your kids enjoying and developing as well ... getting some tools to use at home too (P6)

it's a really good, honestly ... I actually feel quite blessed that one of my friends had posted. I really, really enjoyed it. (P10)

I did not expect that it would bring so much learning from this program. (P11)

The participants unanimously advocated for Sing&Grow and all would recommend attending to others. When asked if they would recommend the program the word used by nearly every participant was "*definitely*". Six out of the ten said they would do it again given an opportunity to do so. Several of the mothers had initiated conversations with local community groups to prompt them to run further Sing&Grow programs. One participant was about to start her third round of the program. This would be her third time with one child but only the first time with her youngest child. She expressed great excitement and followed her interview up with two emails commenting how successful their first session had been.

Overall, the qualitative data provided interesting perspectives on the program. Key points from the interviews are summarised below.

Participation in the Sing&Grow program developed capacity in the parents by:

- Promoting social relationships with other parents in similar circumstances. This assisted their sense of belonging, enhanced their confidence, and mediated anxiety by offering support. These relationships often continued long after the Sing&Grow sessions had ended, continuing to support parents into the future.
- Being inclusive – promoting acceptance of varying ages, abilities and cultures.

- Educating parents about child development. Parents learnt what to expect of their child developmentally. This helped to validate and ‘normalise’ their parenting experiences and gave them knowledge about their child’s stages of development. Children were seen as unique individuals with their own capacities.
- Accepting parents with children with additional needs as part of the group.
- Learning parenting tools. Music was understood as a tool for encouraging children to do routine tasks, mediate moods, and as a distraction for behaviour management purposes.
- Assisting parents to learn culturally accepted parenting.
- Developing creativity, musical skills and confidence to try new things.
- Enhancing family relationships through creating strong bonds, positive sibling connections and improved relationships between the child and other caregivers (such as fathers). The result of this is that the home environment is happier. Parental stress is alleviated through more positive interactions.
- Mediating parental anxiety by inculcating strategies and capabilities to assist children in future learning environments.
- Alleviated maternal guilt by providing activities that were perceived as worthwhile.
- Valuing parents through professional relationships with the facilitator made parents feel capable. Facilitators showed a genuine interest in parents and offered support.
- CD helped parents to remember activities and facilitated engagement outside of the session.

The program provided tangible affordances for children including:

- Socialisation, developing an appreciation for music, development of fine and gross motor skills, language and communication skills, self-regulation, confidence in a group setting, and learning about the expectations of others such as listening and following instructions and adjusting to a new routine.
- Readiness for more formal learning opportunities such as pre-school or school.
- Improved relationships with family.
- Familiarity and confidence in new situations such as formal school.

Overall, parents were extremely positive about the program and all said they would do it again and recommend it to others. One participant described Sing&Grow as an “all-round experience”.

6. Discussion and implications and recommendations

This study provides an important addition to the existing Sing&Grow evidence base. Specifically, pre to post significant improvements in multiple domains of parenting self-efficacy, responsivity, and specifically engagement in music as a home learning activity are documented for the first time here. Given the known links between these positive parenting attributes and family functioning and child development over time, these key changes in early parenting are likely to set the scene for positive family trajectories over time. The significant improvements in parents' use of singing in the home is considered particularly important given the known associations between this home learning activity and attentional regulation and prosocial skills for children (Williams et al., 2015). The use of music as a parent-child activity is a key mechanism for intervention for the program, reflected in the evidence presented here.

Improvements in children's cognitive and behavioural regulation skills including attention and persistence are extremely important given the well-established links between early childhood self-regulation and future learning and wellbeing trajectories. These improvements achieved through Sing&Grow will set the scene for future self-regulatory growth and support children's transition to school.

Taken together with evidence from prior Sing&Grow studies, this study contributes to enhanced understandings of the mechanisms for change created by the Sing&Grow program, as depicted in the logic model drafted (Figure 1). Specifically, Sing&Grow participation enhances parental knowledge of early child development and learning, and their capacity to respond to children, and boosts parenting self-efficacy, along with building social capital for families. These create the conditions under which parents can experience improved mental health and wellbeing, can engage in more frequent and engage in more high quality home learning experiences with their children. This environment stimulates enhanced social-emotional growth in children, and supports other developmental areas which all support positive learning and wellbeing trajectories for children as they enter school.

Recommendations arising from this project include:

For research:

- Test the proposed theory of change through in-depth qualitative work along with rigorous quantitative research designs including quasi-experimental designs that include a comparison group.
- Consider enhanced parental responsivity measures through the use of video and other observational protocols.
- Consider enhanced child self-regulatory measures through the use of standardised assessments for preschool children, for example, on executive functions from 3 years.

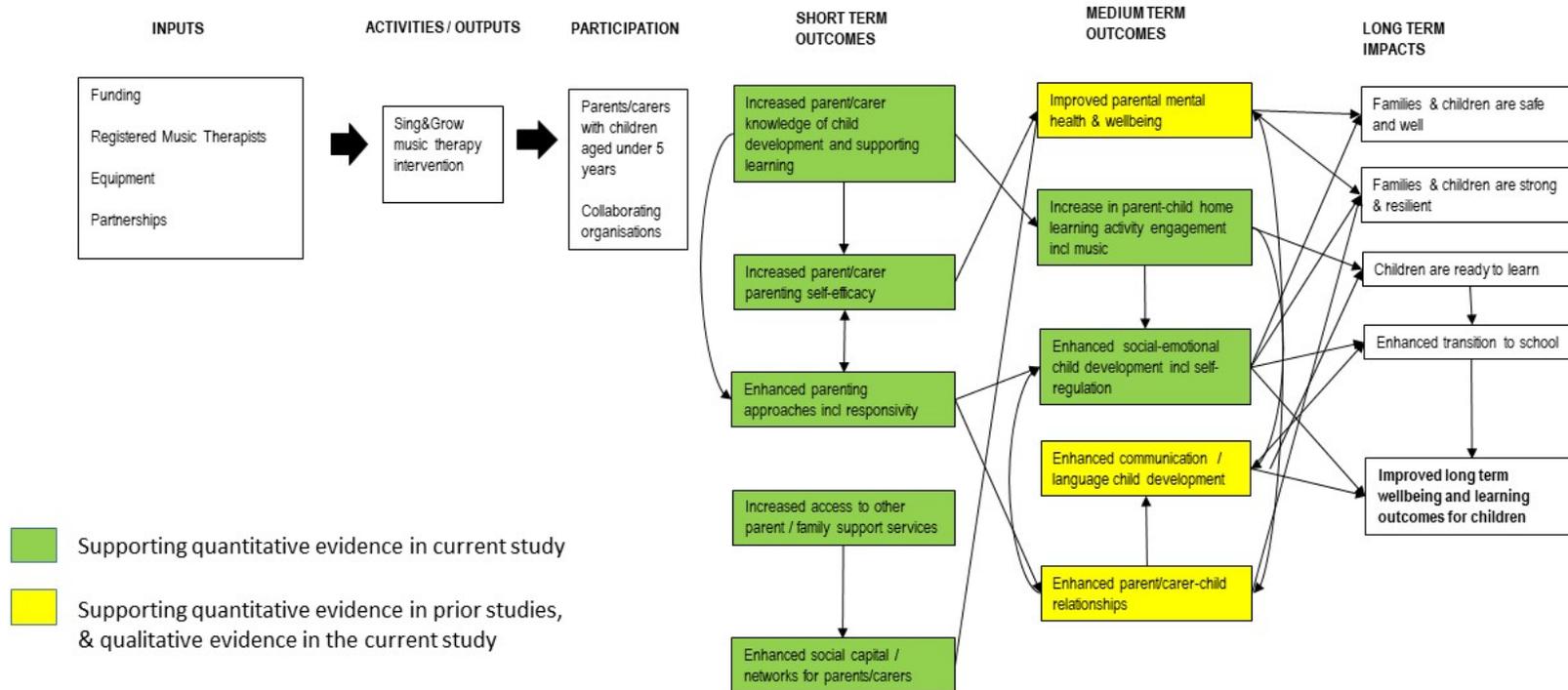
- Consider enhanced child language measurement through standardised assessments.
- Consider a longitudinal cohort study that follows children attending Sing&Grow through to school transition

For practice

- Maintain an extra person to participate in Sing&Grow sessions in addition to facilitator to assist parents with extra children or in difficult situations.
- Maintain the procedure of centres providing a short time afterwards for social time – such as morning tea – for parents to chat informally and cement relationships.
- Sessions to extend beyond one term.
- Information for the parents on the value of the activities and the rationale behind the program – explicitly educating parents on the value of music as a tool for parenting and promoting children’s development.

Figure 1

SING&GROW LOGIC MODEL AND EVIDENCE [FEBRUARY 2020]



7. Report summary and conclusion

This report sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the Sing&Grow program to enhance parent and child capacities through:

- A) measuring the extent to which the program participants report changes in parenting self-efficacy, responsive parenting, and home use of music with children over time, in addition to measuring changes in child self-regulation and behaviour over time.
- B) exploring qualitative data from participating families in relation to children's transition to school following earlier participation in Sing&Grow.

The findings demonstrated that the program is effective in increasing parental capacity and subsequently improving family life and children's outcomes through the intervention delivered by music therapists. This was evident in both phases of the study. The quantitative phase measured small but significant improvements in parents' self-efficacy, and children's cognitive self-regulation, and for those who began below the mean, improvements in parental responsiveness, behavioural regulation, prosocial skills, sociability, and a reduction in internalising problems.

Evidence from the qualitative phase suggested that Sing&Grow supports improved social relationships for parents, enhanced family relationships, and offers affordances for children's skill development and readiness to learn. Learning about child development, culturally accepted parenting and learning parenting techniques were all reported as benefits of attendance in the Sing&Grow program.

Although there was not a substantial amount of data to measure Sing&Grow's effectiveness regarding school transition, parents yet to attend school could see the value in the Sing&Grow program for preparing children for more formalised learning. The case study of the parent who had attended the Sing&Grow transition to school program was overwhelmingly positive about its contribution to her son's successful transition to school.

This study makes an important contribution to the existing Sing&Grow evidence base through demonstrating for the first time, significant improvements in children's cognitive self-regulation over time, as reported by parent, with important implications for school readiness for children. The study also documents for the first time, pre to post intervention improvements in parents use of music at home, and self-efficacy in areas with strong ties to Sing&Grow key parenting messages.

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Appendix 1 Interview questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project.

1. How long did you and your child participate in the Sing&Grow program?
2. Have you participated in music sessions or anything like that before?
3. How did you come to be become involved in Sing&Grow?
4. What did you think the program would be about?
5. How would you describe your experience of participating in Sing&Grow?
6. What did you like most about the sessions?
7. What did you like least about the music sessions?
8. What was one of your favourite experiences or memories from the program?
9. What do you think your child got out of going to Sing&Grow?
10. Some research on Sing&Grow has shown that the program helps improve children's concentration and focus? Did you experience that?
11. What about improvements in managing emotions? Perhaps in dealing with situations where they didn't get what they wanted or managing frustration if they couldn't do something?
12. Or developing social skills – say turn-taking and sharing with other children?
13. How about you? What do you feel you gained by participating?
14. Some research has said that music groups like Sing&Grow help parents to feel more confident in their parenting. Was this your experience?
15. What ideas did it give you?
16. Have you used any of the ideas from Sing&Grow in your home life? If so, what and how? If not, what has been the barrier for you?
17. How has the program impacted your relationship with your child/ren do you think?
18. Has your child transitioned to school or kindergarten? How did it go?
19. What sort of skills are important for children to have to settle into school?
20. Do you think participating in Sing&Grow influenced how your child transitioned to school at all? In what way?
21. Can you share any other experiences or stories about your time with Sing&Grow or how things have been for you since then?
22. What might you tell other parents that were considering attending this program?