

# Self with baby: Supporting the dance of connectedness in a community-based mother and baby dance therapy group

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## Abstract

A community-based dance-movement therapy group can offer a nurturing, supportive environment for mothers in a busy, unsupported world where the problem of disconnection may be experienced. Within the safe space, with the movement experiences and the interventions of the dance therapist, the mother begins to see her baby and to respond intuitively to his expressions and needs. Her new identity as a mother doing the demanding task of mothering is validated. The mother can gain a sense of herself with her baby.

**Key words:** dance therapy for mothers and babies, mother and baby dance, disconnection, isolation, the mothering task, motherhood.

## Introduction

A busy, unsupported world surrounds many mothers and fathers today, as they confront the task of parenting. The mother must gain a new sense of self-identity as mother of the new baby. This is a developmental task, which arises with the event of motherhood (Stern, 1995), and is intimately bound up with the growth of the bond of connection between mother and baby. Lack of support and a sense of isolation can contribute to the mother's experience

of disconnection. The support offered by a community dance therapy program for mothers and their babies surrounds the mother with a safe and nurturing environment of experiential learning. In such an environment the bond of connection with her baby is fostered, and the sense of her innate ability to mother is strengthened.

While the mother-baby connection is the focus of this article, the author acknowledges that the engagement of the father in sharing the parenting role is also crucial.

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## Disconnection in a bush setting

The problem of disconnection and its outcome is the subject of an Aboriginal Australian Dreamtime story about Bunbundoolooy and her son (Lambert, 1993). The story teaches the vital importance of the mothering and caretaking role by its absence, as Bunbundoolooy the mother, in her disconnection, abandons it. The story is retold in this article as a sharing of Indigenous Australian culture and wisdom.

In the story of Bunbundoolooy, the mother leaves her baby in the bush when she goes to gather food. The mother is

isolated in the bush landscape, without the surrounding and guiding presence that communities traditionally provided for new mothers. A sense of isolation and the experience of a lack of support is common for mothers and for fathers now, as they take up the roles and the task of parenting a new baby.

The recollection of my own experience in the Australian bush which I experienced while disconnected from my sick baby son, was rekindled by the story of Bunbundooleoey.

### **Bunbundooleoey, the mother, and her son**

*Bunbundooleoey, the mother, and her baby son, who was just crawling, shared the same name. His mother carried him on her back in a small netted sling, a goolay, as she set out to gather food. Near a clump of wattle trees, she saw large white grubs, good to eat, and picked them up, then used her pointed yam digging stick to dig up more. She went from tree to tree. To gather them all, she put down her goolay with her birralee, her baby son, in it, and travelled further. In the excitement of her search, as she gathered things good to eat, Bunbundooleoey forgot her goolay, and wandered away, never once thinking of her child, until at last she reached the far country.*

*The birralee soon woke up and crawled out. As he crawled, he became stronger and stronger, raised himself up by a tree, and stood up. Stronger and stronger, he walked alone, and then he ran. He grew into a big boy, and became a man, never seeing his mother.*

*In the far country, at last, his mother remembered the birralee she had left. 'Oh', she cried, 'I must go back – mad I must have been when I forgot him – my birralee!' She reached the place near the wattles,*

*and saw the tracks he had made crawling, walking, running, the steps bigger as he became grown up. She came to his camp and saw the weapons he had made, and his possum skin cloak, patterned inside.*

*She saw him approaching, and ran to him, crying out in her joy, 'Ah, Bunbundooleoey, my son, my son!' Stern-faced and unspeaking, the son picked up a big stone and swiftly threw it, hitting his mother so hard that she fell dead to the earth; then he strode on to his camp (retold from Lambert, 1993).*

### **Bonding process**

In the Aboriginal Dreamtime story, the image of the mother, far from her baby in the bush landscape, resonated strongly with me, for I had experienced disconnection from my own son. My second child was seriously ill and was in hospital for many weeks after his birth. The journey to connection began for me when I was far from him, in the summer bush. Time, distance, disconnection from my sense of motherhood, and also the spacious and containing qualities of the surrounding bush landscape, are indelible memories.

I remember the very 'far country' of emotional disconnection from where I had to return to collect my son, and begin to take on a task of unknown dimensions. I remember the baby's (my son's) purposeful readiness for relatedness. The sense of identity as a mother (and co-parent), and the confidence to take on a demanding mothering task grew slowly and quite consciously, as I took in my son's responses and felt acknowledged by him.

When he came home, we all wondered how things would go. The baby himself, however, led his way into the heart of our

family, by his extraordinary preparedness to do so (McHale, 2007; Murray and Andrews, 2000). He took to the breast with a will, after all that time, so that I felt a confidence in my ability to mother him. I felt recognised by him as his mother who could and would mother, and I recognised myself.

Within minutes of being home, he spat out the tiny pacifier on which he constantly sucked in hospital, and would never take it again. He seemed to know he was at home, and that things would be okay with us. We began to feel at home with ourselves and comfortable about parenting. We could probably bring him up; we could do it.

After a few days, he gasped and jumped at an expression he heard, so that the game of repeating the words and tone for him was played. Between our looks of recognition and the sounds we made, a dance began. I really met this little person that day, in the lively and meaningful space between us. Now I recognise this as an experience of the potential play space between mother and baby in which each of their individual selves continues to grow amidst the events and realities of life.

While he was still in hospital, a few weeks old, I had, from my point of view, abandoned him, going away into the bush for a few days with my husband and daughter. A kind of healing happened for me as we left the city. I felt the bond and pull of connection to him. During the days in the bush, I knew that, regardless of the difficulties ahead or the ambivalence I felt, I would be with him.

When I found the story of Bunbundooleoey, and recalled my own experience of disconnection in that summer bush landscape, I was also struck by some of the

similarities of Bunbundooleoey's dilemma with the sense of isolation that is felt by many new parents.

### **Holding the mother as she takes on the vital task of mothering**

Awakening from her preoccupations, Bunbundooleoey the mother is stricken to find herself disconnected from her place of belonging and her son. She has deserted the vital mothering role, which would have engendered warmth, empathy, connectedness and an intimate bond with her baby son. The bond of connection that develops between mother and baby allows the mother to take up two tasks: the vital task of mothering her new baby and the developmental task of taking on a new identity of herself as mother.

In the story of Bunbundooleoey, and for new parents today, there are distinctions to be made between individualism and a new sense of identity that includes the baby; between economic demands and the ability to be present for one's baby. In addition, parents can not simply take on a traditional role now as a mother or father. Each family member is an individual needing to grow, and each family is individual in relation to other similar and different families (Rose, 2000; Schmidt-Brabant and Sease, 1999).

Stern (1995) speaks of the disappearance of a supporting matrix of traditional roles around the 'women's business' of birth and early childcare now, along with the demise of the extended family. There are almost impossible pressures placed on the mother, and the new father, as well, when they must accomplish their task on their own. Stern elucidates the need of mothers to feel surrounded and supported, to be accompanied, as they learn to do their new task, and to be aided, valued and appreciated.

These surrounding attributes of support can 'hold' the mother, as she is physically and metaphorically 'holding' her baby (Austin Health, 2007; Rose, 2000; Stern, 1995; Murray and Andrews, 2000). 'Move with your Baby', a community dance-movement therapy project, creates a supporting environment to 'hold' the mother as she takes hold of her task, and handles and holds her child and his needs.

New fathers, while offering support to their partner and baby, share the sense of isolation. Fathers have participated in 'Move with your Baby' sessions at their request, taking a turn to experience a session with their baby, or sharing the experience with their partner and baby in a family threesome. Parent and toddler sessions in 2009 extend the opportunity for fathers to participate and receive the support offered to them in their parenting and co-parenting roles. McHale (2007) underlines the important contribution made by fathers who are engaged and flexible in family interactions.

### **'Move with your Baby': mother and baby dance program**

The sense of isolation for a new mother can come from being at home with her infant and no longer part of a workplace community, or separation from family support through distance, or through her partner's working hours. There may be sleeping or feeding difficulties with her baby, or strain felt in carrying her baby about. The presence of these issues can indicate the need for the support and experiential learning about mothering that can be offered by the community-based, 'Move with your Baby – Mother and Baby dance program'.

This innovative project is a community partnership with Ashburton Baptist Church

and the Craig Family Centre. It began in Ashburton, Melbourne, in 2004, coinciding with the introduction of screening for post-natal depression by Maternal and Child Health Nurses in the City of Boroondara. The project has received City of Boroondara community grants for 2004, 2007, and in 2009 as Moving Together, with parent and toddler sessions extending the project to fathers.

The program is open to all mothers and babies, or parents and toddlers, and advertised by brochures distributed throughout the community. Mothers are also referred by the Maternal and Child Health nurses in the area, and by the Family Support Network. Referrals have also come from the dance therapist at the Austin Hospital Parent and Infant Psychiatric Unit. Mothers have joined the group while still in the hospital unit, and continue when back at home.

The emphasis is on a special time for the mother to share with her baby, enjoying her baby's responses to the movement experiences. There are usually five mothers and their babies in the group. Mothers frequently choose to remain with the program for two or more terms. The emphasis on a special time to share with their lively toddler is extended to mothers and fathers in the parent and toddler sessions.

### **Moving together**

Each session, we begin by gathering together on the floor on a cloth or blanket, sharing the babies' responses to a play object, and their delight in their mothers' voices singing or saying a traditional song or rhyme. Mothers gain practice in holding and carrying their babies as we move about in the space; babies may chuckle as we move at different speeds, or look

at something that is hanging there. There may be music or more of the entrancing voices accompanying us. When the babies are placed down on blankets, mothers continue to interact with them through touch, the sound of a shaker, and so on.

The movement experiences and therapeutic interventions are planned to help the mothers to notice their babies' responses. Noticing more about what her baby is doing aligns the mother more with the baby's needs and she can move to meet them intuitively. This is what is meant to happen, the mother following her baby's lead, and responding intuitively and in reflection of his needs and feelings (Winnicott, in Shepherd et al (Eds) 1996). Moments of shared experience bring mother and baby closer together and engender a growing sense of self for each (Stern, 1985).

Simple materials and recorded classical or world music lend support to the movement experiences whose qualities in turn support the dance of interactions between mother and baby. The qualities of aliveness and spontaneity are inherent to movement, contributing to shifts in mood and to the mother's self awareness, an internal consistency, as she senses herself in movement.

One mother spoke of the self-conscious discomfort she felt when she first danced with her baby, saying this was in contrast to the self-confidence she felt in her professional role. When she initiated energetic peeking and hiding games with her baby, her playful efforts had been met by her baby's puzzlement at the sudden, unexpected movements of her mother. As the mother began to notice and be enchanted by her baby's responses, she exclaimed with joy, while moving through the space with bells that were jingling and then silent: *She (the baby) is listening and*

*looking around for where the sound has gone! She loves running down with the jingling!* The mother has begun to see her baby. This is news worth reporting! The next week this mother reported: *My baby is suddenly full of wonder!* In experiences that help the mother begin to see her baby, her intuitive response to her baby's needs is strengthened, along with the sense of herself as a mother.

There is a time for relaxation, the spaciousness to simply be. Mothers lie on a blanket with their babies beside them. Mothers are guided to notice the movement of their breath, and the contact of their body with the floor. The babies very quickly settle into the quiet atmosphere. They often gaze and smile at their mothers during this time, roll and curl towards them or lie peacefully beside them.

A mother and baby had been referred to the program following upheaval and change in their lives since his birth. In their first session, the baby held his face in a frown with his lips tightly pursed throughout the new movement experiences. When his mother held him out in front of her, in imitation of the action of another mother, the baby's legs extended out stiffly from his tense body.

During the relaxation time, the baby lay peacefully beside his mother, and he smiled at my approach. His mother raised herself on her elbow to see. Her baby smiled back at her and they remained gazing into each other's eyes for the rest of the relaxation time. They had both been able to relax and were present for each other. In her baby's gaze and smile, the mother could find radiant acknowledgement of herself as a mother. In her smiling response, the baby could find the mirrored affirmation of his inner

world of experience, a growing sense of self for him (Winnicott, 1996). Babies, in holding the gaze of their mother, feel held and safe in the interaction (Rose, 2000). This mother said; *He was saying, 'Thank you, Mummy, for bringing me - this is fun!'*

The refreshing alternation of movement and rest can allow for the integration of an experience. One mother's experience during the relaxation time led her to write that: 'It taught me to be able to relax while being with my baby'. After moving interstate, the mother wrote again in a letter that this experience had been the first time she had felt the sense both of herself and of her baby. The dance therapy session with its holding support, can offer 'a safe place to be a mother' (Participant, feedback form response, September 2007); a place of belonging, to her mothering role and to her baby, that Bunbundoolee the mother sought, hurrying back through the bush towards her child.

### Seeing her baby, seeing herself

In the photograph, the mother holds her baby up to the soft touch of a sari as they walk beneath it. The baby's actions are vibrant, the gaze direct. The baby elicits the mother's response most purposefully. The baby is the initiator; the mother will reflect back the baby's response with her own. In the mother's face, then, the baby will see herself. In the baby's face, the mother will see the reflection of herself as a mother.

In observing and considering the vitality and rhythms of interaction between mothers (and fathers) and babies, I am reminded of a description of the living, spontaneous nature of love, that we make visible in our expressions. It is not sentiment. Love is alive in our bodies and dances with us in our interactions (Pirani, 1991).



*Photo: Stuart McEvoy  
Sharing the experience:  
Vibrant communication  
between a baby and her  
mother in 'Move with  
your Baby' session*

### Conclusion: Self with baby

In the dance of daily interactions between parent and child, relatedness grows, along with the baby's sense of self, and the mother's sense of self-identity as a mother in her demanding new role. Sharing the parenting task, fathers help shape the characteristic dance of interactions in their family (Kestenberg, 1999; Loughlin, 1997, 1999; McHale, 2007; Murray and Andrews, 2000; Stern, 1995; Winnicott, in Shepherd et al (Eds) 1996).

A community-based dance-movement therapy program for mothers and babies can offer a holding support for a mother in a busy, unsupported and isolating world. While she is held within the safe space and the movement experiences and by the interventions of the dance therapist, the mother begins to notice her baby's responses, and her new identity as a mother doing the demanding task of mothering is validated. The mother can gain a sense of herself with her baby.

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