

Families Dancing Together

Heather Hill



Dr. Heather Hill, Prof. member DTAA, is currently developing a new direction for her work –this time as a trainer of dementia care staff using dance and embodiment as modes of learning.

She is also involved in a program for families and children with disabilities called Dance Family. This career expansion follows her being a dance therapist for over 20 years, creating and teaching in a DMT course at RMIT, and then teaching at the Melbourne Institute for Experiential and Creative Arts Therapy (MIECAT).

Heather is an author who has published widely, and also a researcher who has conducted several projects.

Having read on the Autism website (See DTAA moves e-bulletin July 2012) about Cecilia Lau’s Treasure Hunt program, I was excited to make contact with Cecilia and compare notes, as I too am running a program for families and children with disabilities. As a result of our conversation, Cecilia has written an article on Treasure Hunt, and I have written a short introduction to a reprinted article on my Dance Family program. I think we are both in agreement about how exciting these programs are!

Dance Family Bayswater Victoria

The Dance Family program in Melbourne’s outer east was initiated by a group of representatives from various organisations*, who also did the applications for funding. The program has been running since February 2011.

The initial vision for the project came from the Merry Makers in Sydney which is a dance performance project with people with disabilities. The committee had been inspired to see the involvement of the people themselves and of the families who supported them, and thought such a project would be a good type of respite program for families. However, Dance Family has taken its own pathway and become quite a different program. The group is much smaller and is not focussed on working towards performance, though that possibility is not excluded.

While the option is there for parents to leave their children, most parents have chosen to remain and

participate in the sessions. So instead of “respite” understood as time out for parents, respite is conceived as the creation of a space where families can find different ways to be together with their children and other families. It’s about families dancing together!

*Dance Family is an initiative of Knox Council, Maroondah Council, EACH, Illoura Early Intervention Service, Parent Support Network, together with parents with children with disabilities. Support has also been given in finding volunteers through the Volunteer Incentive Program of Eastern Recreation & Leisure Services Inc

The following article is reprinted with kind permission of the Bayswater Buzz - Bayswater community newspaper published by Interchange Outer East. December 6, 2011. P. 9

Dance family matters

Tim Kroenert

Dance therapist Heather Hill describes them as 'magic moments'. They might equally be described as 'breakthroughs'; moments where children who have, for extended periods, been unresponsive to activities, suddenly come alive to them. 'A child who doesn't have eye contact: you'll have a few minutes of eye contact,' says Heather. 'A child who doesn't come into the circle, suddenly one week will be there the whole time. The magic moment for us is where you see total involvement.'

These moments come as part of Dance Family, the weekly dance therapy group Heather runs in Bayswater for children with experience of disabilities, and their families. It is built around the idea of 'people being joined together by dance'. 'It's not dance teaching,' Heather explains. 'It's working with people with expression and communication through dance, looking at dance as a human activity that people do to express themselves, to join with others socially, and communicate with others.' Rather than formal choreography, the focus is 'bringing out the creativity in people, to find their own movement. We have the parents, the children with disabilities (a wide range of ages), and sometimes their siblings. It's a huge, diverse group.'



Photo: S.A. Cleeve

The classes commence with a warm-up that involves getting people to begin to move and giving them a chance to meet and greet. 'Some of the children have difficulty connecting with other

people, so it's trying to get everyone to feel comfortable.' The sessions vary but usually will explore one or several different aspects of dance, from creative movement and stretching to music, drama and use of props. 'This term we're exploring rhythm and will build up to a drumming session.'

'What's really important for many of the kids is to be situated in their body and be able to use their body in a creative way to interact with others. The aim is to do things the adults and the children can work on together, a bit like creative problem solving and play. It's all about relationship and inclusion.'

Importantly, Heather notes, 'we're not working with disability, we're working with what people can do. Some person might not be able to do certain things, but there are other things that they can do. It's about acceptance, and creating a safe environment.'

In the long term there is the possibility of public performance. For now it's a matter of parents and children having fun and benefiting from the chance to interact creatively and socially. And, of course, appreciating those magic moments as they occur.

'I find it more exciting than going to see the Australian ballet,' says Heather. 'When you see all the parents and the kids totally involved, not just doing the steps but doing their movements with feeling and involvement, it's really lovely to see.'

Call Rosie Dyson on 9758 7991 or email illoura@knox.vic.gov.au

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