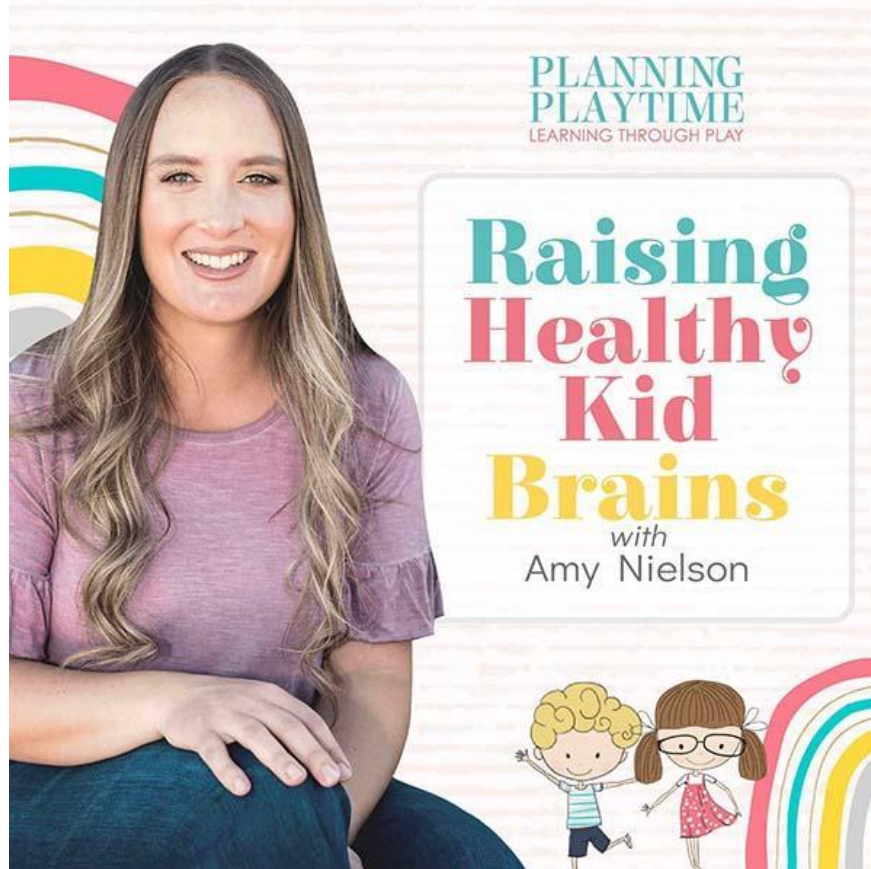


Ep #18: Supporting Your Child's Development Through Music Therapy with Stephanie Leavell



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Amy Nielson

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Is there a way to use music to decrease stress and anxiety for our kids, maybe even non-ideal communication between us and our kids during high stress points of the day like getting ready and leaving for school or having to leave playdates and be done or even getting ready for bed, things like that? Today I'm talking with music therapist, Stephanie Leavell. She is a mom, a board certified music therapist and the founder of musicforkiddos.com which is an online education company that provides high quality music that supports a child's brain development.

She just released her second album of original music for kids on March 3rd, it's called *Made to Bloom*. We had an amazing conversation about how to use music to talk less at our children, to kind of substitute that talking at our children to using music that gives a non-verbal communication. We also talked about how you can use music to help children learn to express what they're feeling, express hard or difficult emotions before they even have the verbal skills to articulate that, just using tempo, melody and rhythm which is kind of powerful.

Another thing we discussed was how you could use music as a developmentally appropriate timer before children can really understand units of time measurements when we say, "Hey, it's going to be five minutes", and kids have no idea what that means. This music can be used as a measurement tool. It's going to be so many songs long or something like that. This conversation was really helpful and very interesting, I hope you enjoy it. It's coming up next on this episode of the *Raising Healthy Kid Brains* podcast.

Welcome to the *Raising Healthy Kid Brains* podcast where moms and teachers come to learn all about kids' brains, how they work, how they learn, how they grow and simple tips and tricks for raising the most resilient, kind, smart, compassionate kids we can. All while having lots of grace and compassion for ourselves because you know what? We all really need and deserve that too. I am your host, Amy Nielson. Let's get ready to start the show.

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Amy: Hi, Stephanie, welcome to the show. We're so happy to have you on today.

Stephanie: Thanks so much for having me, Amy, I'm so glad to be here.

Amy: Okay, I'm a little bit excited because I have a little bit of a thing for music. And I'm curious, how did you get into music therapy?

Stephanie: Yeah. It was a long and windy path. I actually didn't find it until I was about 20. I just didn't know it was a thing. I knew that I loved music. I grew up playing music. My whole family is musical. Growing up my parents were in a band together, a rock band. And so I just have had a lot of this experience of a life filled with music but I was never a performer. And that always felt really different for me. And so when I stumbled into music therapy in college, my school fortunately had a music therapy major.

And when I kind of stumbled into it I went to my first class just to kind of try it out, the intro class and I was absolutely hooked. I was like, "This is the thing that I have been looking for." It's my way to make music that doesn't put me on a stage necessarily where I always felt like music was a gift to give somebody, if that makes sense. So it was that kind of feeling of incorporating music in that way and it just felt perfect for me.

Amy: I love that, music is a gift, yes, okay. So I grew up in a very musical family as well and my mom was in a trio that traveled and sang and stuff. And so I did singing and playing instruments all growing up.

Stephanie: Amazing.

Amy: So this is so fun for me to get to talk about music. Do you have a favorite instrument that you like to play?

Stephanie: Yeah, I do. I actually love to play the guitar but I didn't start playing the guitar till I was 16. I grew up playing the harp. I started playing when I was seven which is kind of a funny story. It's not typical for a kid to start playing the harp at seven. But I started playing the harp young and that is the instrument

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that I played through college but the instrument that I go to when I choose to is the guitar. And I guess I would say my voice, which is definitely an instrument, that's probably my favorite, singing.

Amy: Yes, I love it, okay, really quick before we start on our conversation today, I have a question now that I'm curious about and that is, do you have a recommendation of when is a good time to start a kid on an instrument? Because you said, I mean harp is obviously a little bit different than some other ones but what's a good age to start getting kids into music and doing music?

Stephanie: Yeah, it depends on the instrument, it depends on their interest level. I would say the last thing you would want to do is encourage a kid to do music lessons when they're not really excited about it. If you can help kind of behind the scenes drum up some excitement and show them maybe what they could do, I think that's a really good way to start. But I think it's really good if it's kid led if at all possible so that that enthusiasm and that buy-in is there.

The ukulele is a wonderful instrument to start kids on if they are kind of interested. Of course so is the piano because you're literally seeing the notes and able to push the notes. And it creates a sound just from that whereas with the guitar you're having to find the thread, push it down and then create the sound. But the ukulele is one that with a lot of kids that I've worked with, even starting as young as four you can teach a kid how to play a song on the ukulele at age four. And so I love that one because it's portable. Kids can be successful on it right away and there's a cool factor about it for kids because it looks like a guitar.

And then also it leads to a lot of the skills directly transferred to a lot of other instruments. Stringed instruments, guitars, things like that, all of those skills transfer. So I don't know. I would say if they're excited about it you could start them as early as four, five, six, but keep it fun, fun, fun, fun. And then maybe get them into lessons if they're really excited about it but mostly keep it fun. I actually wrote a curriculum, it's called Ukulele for Kiddos. And it's specifically, this is really simple.

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And it's for even a non-musical adult to watch a five minute video, learn a song on the ukulele and then go teach it to their kid because that's how easy the ukulele is. So yeah, if people are interested in that, that's on our website. But I love the ukulele as a starter instrument.

Amy: That's so fun. Okay, cool, we will put a link to that down below in the show notes because that sounds like a really cool thing to do with your kid and get them started. Alright, let's talk kind of about what we were getting together to talk about today and that is using music in daily routines and to ease transitions throughout the day. And we were talking about this not just for teachers but also for parents. So talk to me a little bit about that and how music works for transitions.

Stephanie: Yeah, I love music as a transitional tool. And the main reason that I love it is that music is a different way to communicate. So there's a lot of opportunity to communicate in music. You of course have the lyrics but you also have the melody and the rhythm and all of these other elements that happen in music, some that you may not even be aware of. Every melody has a cadence so every melody can sound like a question or it can sound like a final answer. It has just all these cool things in there.

And with kids we're giving them verbal instructions all day long. Go put on your shoes. Go get in the car. Eat your food. Eat your food. Eat your food, two more bites. And so something that I love about music is that we can reduce our verbal communication and increase our musical communication. And that often just changes things up enough that you're going to get a little bit more buy-in, it's going to be a little bit more fun. If people are stressed it's really hard, and I say this as a mother who of course experiences a lot of stress just in the household day-to-day tasks, I mean how can you not, honestly?

And I cannot be stern and grumpy if I'm singing this cute little song. So it's really helpful for me as well.

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Amy: Yeah. I love that. So it can kind of help maybe regulate us as well as helping our children. I feel music has such a way of changing mood I feel like with my kids. And do you find that to be true?

Stephanie: Yeah, absolutely. There is one song in particular that we'll talk about that I swear is more for me because so much of that regulation process is if you're helping kids regulate so much of it is are you yourself regulated? Have you taken a moment to check-in with yourself to see how you are doing? Have you taken a quick breath? And a lot of these songs are kind of a reminder that they're playful. For me it's like, okay, this is a four year old, they're going to need lots of reminders.

They're going to need a short amount of time to be able to do these things we're asking them to do or a long amount of time depending on what we're asking them. But yeah, it absolutely has the potential to change both your mood and your feeling about the situation and the child's.

Amy: Yes, okay. And so we can use music as a way to communicate without having to do so much talking at children because I feel like, yeah, like you said, we do so much of that. And you use lyrics you said and different melodies and different rhythms and cadences and things to communicate maybe different things. What does that look like?

Stephanie: Yeah. So in my music that I write I'm really careful about stacking the different kinds of musical communication. For example, if in a song, go, go, go, go, go and stop. For example, that's a little song that I have used before just as a playful song with kids. You'll hear go, go, go, go, go. It's kind of this, it's got the lyrics in there, it's got the melody in there. And that sounds like something's about to come. And stop. And then stop is when the music stops. And so I always make sure if I was playing guitar for example my music would end there. It would always end. When I say stop it's always stop.

When I'm singing about shaking an egg shaker up high, my music is always going up high. When I'm singing a song about an egg shaker playing down low, my music is always going low. So I make sure that it is always really, really

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consistent and I can stack the musical communication. I can make sure the rhythm matches the lyrics, matches the melody, matches the cadence, matches kind of the structure of the stop and go and everything.

And what I find as a music therapist is that if I am really intentional about how I'm communicating with each piece of the music I can help more kids be successful because some kids are going to process the lyrics first, not very many by the way. Lyrics are kind of an end thing for a lot of brain processing, but some kids are going to process the lyrics first. Some kids are going to process the rhythm. So they're really going to catch onto that stop and the fact that the guitar or the music stops right there, more so than the word 'stop'.

And some kids are going to pick up on the cadence, the fact that it sounded like something was coming and they were kind of interested in this anticipatory sound. And they're going to catch onto that cadence and be able to participate there. So if I have a classroom of kids or a group of kids then my odds are increased that more kids are going to be successful and more kids are going to feel confident. And more kids are going to feel a part of the group and feel like they can participate with their peers no matter kind of what their processing speed is or what their processing kind of abilities are at that stage.

If I widen the opportunities for them to connect with that music then there's a better chance that they're going to be able to be a part of the group in that way.

Amy: I love that. Okay, so with this music therapy it feels like it's almost a way to help them develop language and vocabulary as well when you're combining kind of those different, hearing those different elements. We had an episode with a speech and language pathologist and she was talking about building language. But it feels like you're kind of building language in with what's happening with the rhythm and with the music. So that's kind of neat but then also working on that emotional regulation possibly as well.

Stephanie: Yeah. Music therapists can work on a huge range of goals. One of my favorite things is to co-treat with a speech language pathologist or an occupational therapist. And just use music, kind of create music experiences to

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reinforce what they're working on in speech and occupational therapy and even physical therapy. But it can be a really wide range of things. It can be communication. It can be certainly getting kids working together in a group. It can be one-on-one. It can be these motor skills, these fine and gross motor skills of moving their bodies or playing these intricate kind of instruments.

What music therapists do is, a child or a person kind of shows up with whatever they bring with this world and we lift them up and help them to feel confident in the things that they have. And we also lift them up and help them feel more confident in the things that they would like to improve. And it can be a lot of things, social, emotional, regulation. Music therapy and sensory processing is really, really a fun area. It's my favorite kind of area of focus. Yeah, communication, all of that.

Amy: That's so cool. I love all the different ways to approach things and how they play and work well together so that's really neat. We talked about using music for these transitions throughout our day and you said you had five examples of different transitions that we could use music to help with and kind of decreasing that verbal communication and giving this other opportunity for communicating through music. Can you tell me about these five musical transitions?

Stephanie: Sure, yeah. And some people are doing these already, no doubt about it. So we'll start with the one that probably most people do, which is a cleanup song in schools and you've got the Barney cleanup song and everything like that. And what I love about a cleanup song, if we kind of expand from what maybe we typically would imagine for a cleanup song, is that it's a timer that makes a lot of sense for kids. So for example, I'll say to kids, "Let's do one song." So my cleanup song is about two minutes long. It's just called Time to Clean Up. You can find it on Spotify and all the streaming services.

And it's about two minutes long and so I could say to a kid, "Should we do our cleanup song one time or two times?" And I let them pick. "Shall we do our cleanup song two times or do you think we're going to need three? Should we see if we can get it done before two times", or something like that. And you can

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kind of take, especially when you're taking a kid that's three or four, two or five. The five minute let's clean-up for five minutes, that feels really abstract. And so being able to communicate with a song is really, really helpful. So that's number one, a cleanup song.

Number two is one of my favorites, is a waiting song because I think like we were talking about before, this is an opportunity to kind of use this also to regulate yourself because a lot of times when we need a waiting song it's because a child is saying, "Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Are we there yet? Can I have a snack? Can I have a snack? Can I have a snack? All these questions again and again and again. And I found this so useful with my daughter. My sister-in-law actually wrote this song. She's a music therapist too.

And she used it with my daughter once and I was like, "What? This is magic." So it just goes like this and I don't have it recorded or anything because it's so short. It just goes, you've got to wait, wait, wait. You've got to wait, wait, wait. You've got to wait until it's time to eat. You've got to wait, wait, wait. And you hear the spirit of it, it's like, oh, man, you've got to wait. I'm sorry but it's fun and it's lighthearted and all of that can be communicated in the music. So instead of me verbally saying, "You've got to wait a couple more minutes, dinner's not ready. You can just turn to a kid and say, "You've got to wait, wait, wait."

And it's a little friendly kind of thing to do and it gives you a really concrete thing to respond with that's positive. What would happen with my daughter is she would start singing with me and we would do the sign language for wait and that was great at age two and three.

Amy: Yeah. So waiting is a thing that children have to do all the time and it's such a hard thing to communicate. And so I love that. And just the way that the song went, I'm thinking, yes, because it's expressing I think the frustration of waiting and yet like you said, making it playful and just almost providing that boundary, you do have to wait. And yes, it's frustrating and that's okay. I love that. What a cool way to communicate that and allow them to be able to express an emotion, maybe they didn't even know how to word out but they could do it through music.

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Stephanie: Yeah, you can feel it in the melody and you can feel that communication in there. And there's almost empathy in there, yeah.

Amy: Yes, so good. I wanted to go back just really quick to number one too and I thought it was so interesting that you were talking about using it as the song, the cleanup song as a form of measurement because for more of an academic side with children in those early ages of preschool, kindergarten, we're not using measurement terms yet. We haven't gotten into inches and feet and things and we're using kind of more of a non-standard measurement where we're trying to teach them to measure something by another thing but it's not using units.

And so you're kind of talking about that same idea now with time. So we're instead of just giving them time which is we're giving them units and they don't know what any of that means. Instead we're just measuring time by a different unit that they do understand. So they're getting the concept of it's going to take three of these songs till we're done. So they can see that it's, maybe this one's only a one song cleanup or maybe this is a three song cleanup or whatever. So we're using that same idea that they're learning academically of non-standard measurement but doing it with time. I thought that was fascinating and such a cool idea.

Stephanie: I love that, I never made that connection before. That is really cool.

Amy: Isn't that interesting? Okay, so now I'm nerding out about that. Alright, so let's go on to number – I nerd out about things, it's fun. Alright, let's go on to number three.

Stephanie: Alright, so number three is a little bit more of an abstract one. And this is a song to bring the focus back. So the way that I would describe this is, and this comes from working in a lot of classrooms. There's something that can happen in music, sometimes I call it, you throw a note for an example. There's something that can happen in music where you can draw in eyes and you can draw in attention unlike anything else.

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So for example, if I was just in a classroom with a bunch of kids and I just went, "Aah." They would all eventually look at me. I would get their eyes because they would be really curious about what in the world am I doing. So not only would I get their eyes but it would get quiet. So using music as kind of an attention grabber can be really interesting and it can bring the focus in, in a really cool way.

So I have a song called Walk, Walk, Walk. And it's like magic with kids, it's so simple but the structure of it I think is something that brings the attention in, gives them something to do with their body so that their body is kind of focused as well. And at the end of this little teeny, tiny, simple song whether you have two kids in front of you or whether you have 25 kids, there's going to be this kind of joint attention that happens. So this is how the song goes and this is on Spotify as well.

We're going to walk, walk, walk and stop. We're going to walk, walk, walk and stop, turn around, reach up, reach down. We're going to walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk, walk and stop. And then you can switch it. You can, we're going to jump, jump, jump and stop. Do you notice I'm kind of playing with the tempo of the song too?

Amy: Yes.

Stephanie: We're going to jump, jump, jump and stop, turn around, reach up, reach down. We're going to jump, jump, jump, jump, jump, jump, jump, jump, jump, jump, jump, jump and stop. And then by playing with that, kids are going to look at me because they don't know what I'm going to do next. And so then we can end with something like, we're going to tip toe, tip toe, stop. We're going to tip toe, tip toe, stop, turn around, reach up, reach down. We're going to tip toe, tip toe, tip toe, tip toe, tip toe, tip toe, stop, sit down. In a classroom that will get 25 four year olds completely with me.

So sometimes if things are a little chaotic or something like that, that is an example of a song that I will use to transition us to something else.

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Amy: That's fantastic. I love this so much. And sometimes I work with really large groups of children so I'm like, "I've got to go on Spotify, I need this song." That is so good because it's so engaging too. I love how fun it is. I love how it uses your body and it focuses all the parts of you and it allows you to, it just brings it all in, so good.

Stephanie: And it's this brain engagement. That's something that's so cool about music is on fMRI when you're listening to music, it lights up the brain in a very complete way. And so by also engaging the body and movement and giving them tasks to do and things like that as part of the music, we are lighting up so much of the brain. And that's why they're able to kind of hone in on you and pay attention in such a big way.

Amy: I love it. It's awesome. Okay, so let's do number four, I'm excited now, what's number four?

Stephanie: Number four is another simple one that utilizes this musical timer. But I wanted to give this specific example because this is such a struggle for a lot of kids and that is just a strategy for getting in the car. So I like this one especially with older kids when we get to six, seven, eight. I recommend together, you two together or you and your kids come up with some kind of get in the car playlist where the kids are picking the songs or something like that. And they have maybe three songs that is 10 minutes or something like that.

And it's just a little playlist that they select and they know that by the time the last song comes and the last song ends they should be in the car buckled up. And it's kind of a fun challenge. So again, it's like the musical timer but we're kind of expanding it to a more challenging task of all the different steps. So if you need to, you can remind them, "By song one we're going to work on getting our shoes on, song two we're going to gather up our backpack, song three, you're going to be in the car buckled up and then I'll come out at the end and we'll go."

And this can be a really nice one to just kind of organize a really, really challenging task and again, if you get kids to select the music and so much of this is about buy-in, and it's their preferred music, it's their favorite music, all you

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have to do is click, put on the song, put on the playlist and you say nothing, they know, this is our get in the car playlist and I have about 10 minutes to get in the car. And once that last song comes on I'd better be walking to the car to get in. And so again, reducing those verbal instructions. And music just turned on in the house without any verbal instructions is communication.

Amy: Wow. I'm just sitting here nodding my head. This is so, wow, because I feel like those are some of those high tension times of the day, that getting into the car before school or it's such a time of anxiety I think for children but also with parents. And it's just a stressful time. We're trying to get out of the door and do the things and what a neat way to have children choosing their own music, but giving them that schedule, that's just brilliant, I love that idea. I'm going to do this. We're going to have this happen at my house.

Stephanie: And you might, and a caution is that that playlist might work five times for some kids. And then you need to switch up the music and you need a new buy-in for that. So then you need to switch up the songs. And also the feel of the song that they're selecting is going to be important. So you can try and kind of encourage them to pick songs that are a little higher tempo, that have a lot going on in their lyrics etc. Because the more elements of music that are in a song, the more your brain is going to tack onto that song.

And so there are some strategies for what songs you pick. And then if you notice some of the motivation dying off a little bit, just do it again. Let's do a new one and try it again and pick a new one. And maybe you pick one and they pick one. And then they tell you, "No, I don't like that one." And you say, "Okay, cool, why don't you pick one?" And just have it be a fun playful thing where ultimately they get to kind of select this music as part of the process.

Amy: And sometimes I've found that when children, my daughter has a playlist for her getting ready to go to ballet or things because she spends a lot of time at ballet. And she's really into pirate shanties right now. So I get to listen to a lot of pirate music. So sometimes they choose very different music than maybe I would listen to but it's, yeah, it's kind of funny. Okay, so let's go on to number five and this one I'm excited about too, tell us about number five.

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Stephanie: Number five is just brushing their teeth. This can be something, and again it's really the musical timer. My toothbrushing song, it's just called Brushing Your Teeth is exactly two minutes long. The goal for them to brush from beginning to end. And this is particularly good with toddlers as they're learning to brush their teeth. And this is another thing, you could have the recording of the song but you could also just look at a child and you could just say, "Brush your teeth." Which is part of my toothbrushing song. And they run, go and grab their toothbrush and you get the process started.

So you don't have to say, "It's time to brush your teeth." You just kind of start having this playful communication with them and just kind of start singing the song and walking over to the sink and see if they're going to kind of play along and join in.

Amy: I love that idea of just using music to kind of cut down on some of the many, many instructions and commands and whatever we're having to give all day and just takes out some of the commands and the things that we're repeatedly asking them to do and makes it really fun and it's just a really good communicator of what's happening.

Stephanie: Yeah, it's success based. It's fun. It's playful. It's everything that kids kind of love and we're encouraging them to express their own interests, their own ideas and their own musical preferences too along the way. And again, looking for that buy-in.

Amy: It's so good. Okay, and you just recently came out with a new album, tell us a little bit about your album.

Stephanie: Yeah. So as a music therapist I create a lot of curriculums for early childhood music therapists and early childhood music teachers. And that is kind of my bread and butter. I write a lot of songs for specific purposes and that's really, really fun for me. And so this is, I would say my first serious children's album that I have released. I have to say it's a little uncomfortable for me because I'm used to being in groups of little kids. But I'm really proud of it, I'm really excited about it. It's called *Made to Bloom* and it was released March 3rd.

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Amy: It's so exciting. We'll definitely include a link to that in the show notes and you guys can go and grab that and listen to that and find some of these amazing songs. And your other songs you said were also available on Spotify too if people wanted to try out some of these other songs.

Stephanie: Yeah, we have songs on Spotify. We have quite a bit on YouTube of these more songs for a different purpose. And then if there are any educators or music therapists or preschool teachers or anybody who's interested in my whole collection of songs, we have a membership and there's about 500 songs in there. There's so many.

Amy: That's amazing. Thank you so much for coming on and having this conversation with me today and sharing some of these really neat ideas and some of your songs. And I'm excited to try out the playlist idea, that's the first one I'm going to go take and try out with my kids.

Stephanie: Good.

Amy: I love it.

Stephanie: That's awesome. Thank you so much for having me.

Amy: Thank you.

I hope you found that conversation very interesting and also super helpful. It's amazing how powerful music is as a tool for communication as well as helping children express and feel and process through emotion. Every single week of Mommy and Me Preschool, we have had our mom and teacher team go through and pick out some of their favorite, favorite preschool music on YouTube and the songs that go with your fun themes every week. And include those in your lesson plan so that you can just hop on the YouTube and have your kids singing and learning or having a preschool dance party immediately.

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And save you the time and effort of having to try to go find songs on your own. Get all of the information about our amazing Mommy and Me Preschool program including all of the fantastic preschool music at mommyandmepreschool.com, come check it out. We can't wait to see you there.

Thank you for hanging out with me today for this fun chat on Kids' Brains. If you want to see more of what we are doing to support kiddos and their amazing brains, come visit us on our website, PlanningPlaytime.com. See you next week!