

How to help children learn

- **Try to see things from their point of view.** Understanding how children see the world will help you to help them as they learn.
- **Let children be children.** A skilled five year old grows from a busy four year old, a curious three year old, a cuddled two year old, an adventurous one year old and a communicative baby.
- **Be a playful companion.** You can enjoy childhood with the children as well.
- **Feelings matter** – both the children's emotions and your own are part of any situation with young children. It is very helpful to be aware of your own moods as well as the children's when enjoying yourself with them and during difficult moments.
- **Don't expect to be perfect.** Everyone does something they don't mean sometimes. Children can be forgiving as long as we are thoughtful most of the time and are ready to say sorry when we should.



Making a noise for music

Linda Pound

Everyone knows how much young children love to sing and dance, but all too often music is thought of as something which only a few specially talented or gifted people will be good at. And it is children's experiences of music which have the greatest impact on their musical development, not an inborn talent. In most cultures around the world, everyone simply assumes that children are musical, and so they are.

Why music is important to people

In every culture, music is used to create or reflect mood or atmosphere. Adults already know how the music played in a place of worship or at a party will affect them, but young children respond directly to the way music makes them feel. You can see this best when there is up-beat and exciting music being played, because children become very lively. But it is also true of other styles and forms of music. For example, if you want to get a child to bed you choose a soothing song or piece of music such as a lullaby – not a march or jig.

There is a very strong link between music and memory. The rhythmic beat and tune help us to remember the words. Music also helps us to communicate where it would otherwise be difficult. A good example of this is yodelling or drumming, where music allows us to communicate over great distances, and in the local park you will often hear adults using a musical chant to summon children from a distance. This is because the tune of the words we use carries the message we want to convey. But music does not only support communication over distances. It is used in lots of ways to support direct communication with babies.

Babies and young children learning through music

Babies respond to sound even before birth. After birth, adults and even small children communicate with babies by using elements

of music. Rhythmic movements and sounds are soothing and stimulating. To capture a baby's attention anyone will speak at a higher-than-normal pitch, and vary the speed, loudness and softness of what they say. We use particular kinds of tunes when we want babies to be soothed, praised or warned. We also use particular kinds of 'tunes' in our speech to help babies identify, express and respond to emotions. In other words, people naturally use aspects of music to help babies develop their social awareness and communication.

Some people say that the voice is a child's first toy. Research has shown that learning is more effective when it is fun – and music makes many situations more enjoyable. Memory also plays an important part in learning. Throughout the world and throughout time, music has been used to help make things more memorable. Just think about the number of song words you know and how many counting songs and alphabet songs help children remember important facts.

Long before they can sing or even walk, babies love to dance. The moment they hear music, they begin to jiggle and sway – their movements usually accompanied by beaming smiles or complete attention. When people sing to them, babies will often watch and sometimes imitate the mouth movements they see. Musical instruments capture their attention, but everyday objects are often equally exciting and can help children to explore a vast range of sounds – even a simple piece of paper can be crinkled and crunched.

Babies also love to watch musicians at work, whether it is a toddler with a drum or a full-scale brass band in the market square. Babies, toddlers and young children love to listen to recorded music, but live music is even more valuable. This is because when they watch people make music, children can feel the vibration which music makes and observe what musicians do to make particular sounds.

Ideas for bringing music into everyday life

Singing

A lot of people feel embarrassed singing in public – even when the 'public' is their baby. But they may be very happy to sing with enthusiasm in the privacy of the shower. It is really worth trying to overcome any embarrassment to help young children's musical development.

Young children don't care whether anyone sings in tune. What matters is the sense of joy, the enthusiasm, rhythm and sounds. In fact, it seems that children can learn the usual tune, even if we don't always sing it 'correctly'. Singing is a form of play which allows children to practice a wide range of sounds over and over again while having fun.

In the early stages of talking, songs can help children to improve their vocabulary. The rhythm of a song helps them to use words fluently – at a time when their spoken language may still be very basic. Action songs help too, because using words, actions and tune together boosts learning.

Sing with children whenever you can. Lots of familiar songs can be easily adapted. For example, the tune of 'Here we go round the mulberry bush' lends itself to all sorts of activities such as 'Now we are scrambling eggs for tea' or 'What shall we have for lunch today?' Children are also very good at making up their own songs. Encourage them to do this – joining in with them and writing down the words.

Dancing

Children often join in with the actions of familiar songs long before they are able to join in with the singing. Moving to music makes them more aware of the sounds they are hearing, and helps them to learn to listen to it. As children grow older, provide them with a mirror so they can

see themselves dancing as this helps them to improve and develop their dances.

Some people are embarrassed about dancing as well as singing. But dancing with children is great fun. It provides everyone with exercise and allows children to think about the music in ways which help them to listen.

Hoops, small instruments, ribbons and other props for dancing can stimulate movement. Examples of different kinds of dancing offer inspiration for children and this may be live performance or video recordings. The brain is constructed in such a way as to make it virtually impossible for children to resist imitating what they see and hear. You can encourage them by joining in.

Instruments and other sound-makers

Adults often worry about noise. While this is understandable it is vital to let children explore the potential loudness and quietness of different sound-makers. Making music outdoors can enable children to play as loudly as possible.

Children enjoy exploring the sounds made by both real instruments and ordinary objects. Steel pans or kettle drums are big and make a big sound, but they are also expensive. However, saucepans, dustbins and buckets are great fun and can help children explore making a big sound. A long length of plastic drainpipe hit at one end with a table tennis bat or a flip-flop produces a great sound. Flowerpots and wooden beaters, metal kitchen utensils – there is so much to explore.

Gentle sounds can be produced by the crinkly plastic inners of chocolate or biscuit boxes. Children love to make shakers from cartons with varying amounts of sand, pebbles or pasta.

Gently tapping a metal jug while pouring water in or out of it produces a wonderful range of sounds. In fact, why not explore with children and find a new sound today or a sound that imitates something else. Making instruments is a useful way to help children understand how sounds are made.

Real instruments don't have to be noisy all the time. You can give children a selection of instruments which make soft sounds. You can give them soft beaters and challenge them to make the quietest sound they can.

Sound can be made in lots of different ways. We usually provide children with lots of instruments that require banging or shaking, but less often with those that are plucked or blown. Think about ways of giving children the opportunity to explore sounds in these ways. Make a guitar with a box and elastic bands or a trumpet out of the centre of a kitchen roll, though if you can, try to give them experience of the real things as well.

Music can help children's physical development as it often requires different actions with both hands. Try to include in your collection of instruments some which can be worn or grasped tightly in the palm. Small egg shaped shakers can be firmly grasped. Bells and shakers fixed to wristbands, or ankle bands, belts or sashes with bells attached give children a great deal of satisfaction. All of these are easily made. Don't forget all the sounds that can be made without an instrument: stamping, tapping, clapping, whistling and so on. These sounds are always (quite literally) to hand.

Listening to music

Children can listen to sounds anywhere. Listening outdoors to the wind, traffic or birds encourages children to listen carefully to sounds. Plants which make a noise (such as bamboo) and wind chimes are interesting to play with.

Young children need opportunities to listen to live as well as recorded music. Think about who you know that can play an instrument or sing. Perhaps a young neighbour is learning to play the violin or recorder – or perhaps granny has a set of bagpipes or a piano accordion in the attic.

Playing with music

Remember that music comes naturally. Help young children to hear the sadness or happiness in sounds. Fill them with confidence by trying to be more confident yourself. If you don't restrict

yourself to known songs or 'real' instruments, you are free to make as many mistakes as you like.

The important thing is to have fun, be encouraging and play lots of music.

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Books about musical development

Marjorie Ouvry (2004) *Sounds like playing*, London: Early Education.

Linda Pound & Chris Harrison (2003) *Supporting musical development in the early years*, Buckingham: Open University Press.

Susan Young (2003) *Music with the under fours*, London: Routledge Falmer.

Song books

Helen McGregor, Bobbie Gargrave, Sheena Roberts & Dee Shulman (2001) *Let's go Zudie-o: creative activities for dance and music*, London: A&C Black (includes CD with music and videoclips)

Sheena Roberts (2002) *Playsongs: action songs for babies and toddlers*, London: Playsong Publications.

Recorded music and dance

Video/DVD: *Stomp Live & Stomp rhythms of the world*, video

CDs: *Ellipsis Arts*: www.ellipsisarts.com

Putumayo World Music: www.putumayo.com

Stockists of instruments

Knock on Wood: www.knockonwood.co.uk

Music Education Supplies Ltd: www.mesdirect.com

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Learning together series

The Learning together series of leaflets aims to help parents and other caring adults understand children's development, play an active part in their learning and enjoy the children they spend time with. The leaflets cover a wide range of topics, including life with babies and toddlers, children's behaviour, being outdoors, drawing and writing, reading, maths, ICT and equality – and more. The leaflets can be downloaded from the Early Education website www.early-education.org.uk

Early Education promotes the right of all children to education of the highest quality. It provides support, advice and information on best practice for everyone concerned with the education and care of young children from birth to eight.