

# My little ukulele

One nursery in north London has started providing ukulele sessions for children once a week.

*Liz Roberts* reports on how babies and children alike are engaging with the instrument

**T**he ukulele has gone from being something of a comedy item to a hugely popular musical instrument in recent years. Now a frequent sight in primary schools, its small size and simplicity make it a great choice for early years music lessons too.

One nursery that has started offering ukulele sessions once a week is Kidz Kabin in Muswell Hill, north London. Local ukulele teacher Margie Gianni, known as Margie Jammie, has run groups and tuition for older children and adults, but this is her first foray into playing for and with under-fives.

Each Tuesday morning, Margie arrives at Kidz Kabin and puts out mats and a range of musical instruments including brightly coloured ukuleles. She runs six short sessions – for under-twos, two to threes, and three to fives, with approaches tailored to age and aptitude.

The children's enthusiasm for the activity is evident as they run over, with Margie's bright blonde hair and equally bright red and pink clothing an attraction too. Margie says, 'Children love the happy sounds, the songs and the different rhythms I create when singing and playing my ukulele. They naturally imitate what I do, so with a few secret tips, a playful approach and plenty of positive reinforcement, they become totally engaged with strumming along to new and favourite songs and rhymes.'

With the babies, the emphasis is on dancing and singing as Margie plays her ukulele, although the children are free to touch the instruments if they want. The two- to three-year-olds love to manipulate the ukulele and enjoy a few other musical toys as well; by alternating instruments and repeatedly picking up the ukulele, initially with guidance and then independently, they learn the correct posture for holding and strumming it.

The pre-schoolers are very keen on strumming throughout the session,



which lasts 20 minutes. As the skin on their fingertips is delicate, Margie has made felt plectrums for them to use. Almost all the older children, and some of the younger ones, are able to apply fingertip pressure to form basic one-finger chords.

Margie puts coloured dots on the neck of the ukuleles to turn the mechanics of finger posture into a fun game. 'Children respond very well to a time challenge for speeding up chord progressions [changing from one coloured dot to another]. This not only results in playing songs together, but also gives them a buzz, and it helps them develop alertness and finger dexterity,' she explains.

Margie says she had an open mind as to which skills young children might be able to acquire with the ukulele. 'Having only taught juniors and adults with The North London Ukulele Club, and bearing in mind that children at this age are still developing hand and finger dexterity, we envisaged the emphasis would be more on exposure, interaction and manipulation.'

'I soon realised that by using exaggerated pretend play I was able

**The sessions are tailored to different age groups, with an emphasis on dancing and singing for babies**



to encourage a "can do" attitude, giving children the confidence to achieve each mini-skill, leading to more complex skills with the instrument, with rhythm practice, singing and also expressing their musicality freely.'

The ukulele sessions are now a highlight of everyone's week at Kidz Kabin. As the children's ukulele skills have exceeded Margie's expectations, she has started to monitor and keep track of children's progress using a session log for each child that is shared with nursery staff, management

and parents.

'This enables her to support each child's learning and gives parents a record if they want their child to continue lessons once they leave the nursery and go to school.'

Kidz Kabin owner Linda Symons chooses to employ a range of external specialists to run activity sessions, including music, yoga and sport, at her nurseries. She opened a second setting in Muswell Hill in September, based at a local secondary school.

'We introduced ukulele lessons because we not only recognise the valuable contribution music makes to early years, but wanted to offer children a unique opportunity to experience something they might not otherwise access,' says Ms Symons.

'Having met Margie and observed her sessions, we realised that she had a natural ability to connect with very young children and even in the few months she has been running her sessions we have all noticed the remarkable progression children have made both in their concentration and musical ability.' ■

**More information**

- Kidz Kabin, [www.kidz-kabin.com](http://www.kidz-kabin.com)
- Margie Jammie, [www.northlondonukeleleclub.co.uk](http://www.northlondonukeleleclub.co.uk) or email [northlondonukeleleclub@gmail.com](mailto:northlondonukeleleclub@gmail.com)