

In the mood

How experimenting with music aids children's personal, social and emotional development and promotes self-regulation. *Linda Pound* explains, and offers practical advice for practitioners

Victor Hugo, French poet and author of *Les Misérables*, famously described music as expressing things that cannot be said but about which it is impossible to remain silent. Think of love songs and protest songs or music that makes you cry or dance with joy. Music taps into deep emotional feelings throughout our lives.

The link between music and emotions begins in childhood, and throughout our lives music can transform our mood. Sometimes it catches us unawares. Hearing a particular song may trigger memories of events many years ago. But sometimes we plan to use music to change our mood – to cheer ourselves up or to help us sleep. This occurs because music changes the chemistry of the brain. Music is, for all of us, highly powerful – but nowhere is it more powerful than in our work with young children.

MUSIC, BABIES AND EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

Musical elements shape the way we communicate with babies from birth. We raise the pitch of our voices – even very young children know to do this if they wish to capture babies' attention. We vary the rhythm of what we say, creating interest for the baby with sing-song utterances. While newborn babies prefer simple visual stimuli, their auditory interest is captured by complex musical sounds and by what Lise Eliot describes as 'highly intoxicated speech'.

Research evidence indicates that the tuneful utterances addressed to babies send them messages about

feelings. Although most of the studies have been carried out in families using European languages, this appears to be a more universal occurrence – apparent even in tonal languages such as Cantonese.

In a nutshell, adults speaking different languages use particular pitch patterns in their spoken words to convey to the infant their approval, their disapproval, words of comfort or simply to capture their attention. Just think about the tunes you use and hear other people using when saying things to babies such as 'Who's a clever girl then?', 'Don't do that!', 'Look what I've got!' or 'There, there – don't fret'.

Colwyn Trevarthen has written a great deal about the role of music and dance in establishing firm attachment between adults and babies. He argues that the musical form of baby songs used in different cultures remains essentially the same – and that the function of baby songs such as 'Walking round the garden' and 'This is the way the ladies ride' is to produce an emotional response – certainly some laughter, but also the build-up of anticipation before the tickle, or even some dread before falling down into a ditch!

Trevarthen also draws attention to the way in which adults don't have to be familiar with traditional rhymes to achieve this – they may use favourite



Music expresses emotions that

pop songs but vary them to mirror the universal features of baby songs.

MAKING MUSIC TO PROMOTE PSED

Musical activity – singing, dancing and playing – offers great opportunities to develop self-confidence. Learning what you can do with your body as you respond to music, learning to control your voice in a variety of ways, and learning to create instrumental sounds that represent weather, moods, animals or an element of an imaginative game all contribute to a sense of agency, self-awareness and confidence. Cards with words of favourite songs and pictures that help children to recognise the song in question enable them to make considered choices about what to sing.

Managing feelings and behaviour

Music can help children to manage feelings and behaviour. In a study of professional musicians, John Sloboda found that one feature of their success seemed to be that in childhood, music helped them to deal with fears.

One musician describes, for example, managing his fear of thunderstorms by creating loud thunderous



ABOUT THIS SERIES

This eight-part series will explore how music:

- aids early learning and development
 - can support learning across all areas of the EYFS
 - promotes the Characteristics of Effective Learning.
- The series will also identify ways in which adults who lack confidence in their own musical ability or competence can become more confident.



are difficult to convey with words

sounds on the piano. Don't just sing 'If you're happy and you know it' – but remember to include verses about feeling angry, scared or sad. This can be followed by discussion about how we demonstrate a range of feelings.

Children who find changes in routine difficult can be helped through song. Periods when children are waiting for lunch or a group story are commonly eased by singing famil-

iar songs. Making this personal can persuade those who find it difficult to persevere – 'John is sitting quietly, quietly, quietly' or 'Harjit's standing very still, very still, very still', etc. We should not, of course, overexploit this persuasive function of music, but it can help to keep children calm.

Creating a sense of co-operation

Using music to signal group tasks can create a sense of co-operation with others, encouraging children to feel that they belong in a group. Nicola Burke found that in settings where a piece of classical music is used to signal that it is time, for example, to get ready for lunch, children may come to generalise this and think of all classical music as signifying mealtimes. However, this seems not to happen if pop music is used.

Perhaps signalling routines for independence and self-help might be better served by the use of chime bars, or a song specifically improvised to fit a particular action might work better. You could, for example, sing 'Help me put the blocks away' to the tune of 'Polly put the kettle on'.

Our earliest relationships are based on musical exchanges. We mirror the sounds that babies make, and they in turn mimic ours. It is clear, therefore, that music has much to offer in helping children to form relationships within group settings. Although within today's society much listening is done alone through headphones, in situations where groups share music there is a magical sense of community and empathy.

Children new to a group may spend



MORE INFORMATION

- Walter Mischel (2015) *The Marshmallow Test: Understanding Self-control and How To Master It*. Transworld Publishers
- Trevarthen C (2006) 'Moving in time: the many messages of a body dancing' in Duckett R (ed) *Movement Languages in Early Childhood Education*. Newcastle: Early Arts North East/ Sightlines Initiative
- Young S (2009) *Music 3-5. Nursery World/Routledge*
- Tune into Listening project (led by Nicola Burke), <https://macbirmingham.co.uk/project/tune-into-listening-project>



Music is part of joyful learning

some time simply watching, but they will gradually join in, starting with some actions or joining in first or last words of songs, gradually becoming more co-ordinated with the actions of others as they gain confidence and learn more songs.

MUSIC, JOY AND PLAYFUL LEARNING

Joyful learning, particularly in young children, is without doubt the most effective approach. It makes use of children's natural exuberance, emotional enthusiasm and their inbuilt pleasure, joy and excitement, described by Mr Trevarthen as 'elements of humanity'. Musical activity – singing, dancing and playing – contributes to such expressiveness, so take every opportunity to harness its potential to make your time with children joyful.

Settings for young children should of course be playful and it is no accident that we habitually refer to 'playing' music. We can make the most of music's playful qualities by ensuring that we model its creative, improvisatory qualities and highlight the playful aspects of children's music-making.

Encourage them to think about the different sounds they can make with different instruments and sound-makers (without damage to instruments). Make the most of their invented songs and dances. A vital aspect of playful music-making in the early years is that it should be fun. The playful approaches that have made music valuable since birth need to be reflected in early years pedagogy.

Use instruments and your voice in imaginative ways to illustrate ►

PRACTITIONERS: BECOMING A CONFIDENT SINGER

Many practitioners say they don't mind singing with the children but they don't like other adults listening to them. However, if you work with young children, you will always be surrounded by other adults. Given the importance of music to children's overall development and the fact that babies' voices are their earliest toy, it is vital that we sing with and to children. Take the plunge:

- Sing at every opportunity – the more you sing, the better you'll feel and sound. Sing in the shower, in the car, in the garden – wherever and whenever you can. Sing high, low, fast, slow. Sing like a witch or a robot. Sing in a whispering voice – sing out loud.
- Don't worry about making mistakes – accept your voice as part of who you are.

Children will enjoy what you do – however worried you are about the quality of your voice or your ability to sing in tune. Reassuringly it appears that children can learn the intended tune from someone who doesn't always hit the right note.

- Enjoy using your voice – make singing playful and joyful!
- Take time to relax your body – breathing, posture and singing will improve. Use your body to help you sing what you want, looking up for high notes, bending slightly for lower ones
- Above all, remember that you're an educator – you don't have to be a performer. Focus on what children are learning through music – not what they think about your talents.

stories or events, providing children with ideas for their own musical exploration.

MUSIC, LEARNING AND SELF-REGULATION

There is a growing recognition that self-regulation is key to successful future learning (see, for example, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function>). It is sometimes referred to as executive function, or you may have seen or heard references to ‘the marshmallow test’ (if not, just Google it – there are dozens of YouTube clips illustrating what is involved).

Self-regulation enables children to plan, focus, carry out instructions and manage frustration. It depends on co-ordination of memory, mental flexibility and self-control. The development of restraint depends on children having a sense of trust in adults around them – and from birth music is key to developing relationships with others.

Music has an important role to play in the development of memory, flexible thinking and self-restraint. We know that music supports memory – just think for a moment of the number of song words that you know.

Playing with tunes and rhythms, and improvising songs and dances, support the cognitive fluidity neces-



sary for creativity. And group music-making offers many opportunities for developing self-restraint. If you are holding a drum that will represent thunder, tempting as it may be to make a loud sound throughout the song, it will be most effective if that playing is controlled. Similarly, songs that require actions to be matched to words or responses at particular points require co-operation and a willingness to resist impulsive actions.

Harvard researchers suggest that

adults can support children’s developing ability to self-regulate by encouraging creative play and social connections through physical activity and through opportunities for choice and decision-making. What better way to do this than to nurture creative music-making. ■

Part four of this series, looking at music and communication and language, will be published in the 11 December-7 January issue of Nursery World.

PRACTITIONERS: THE LANGUAGE OF MUSIC AND EMOTIONS

Technical terms can get in the way of understanding music and are less important than enabling children to explore the many ways in which music can support their personal, social and emotional development. Discussing with children how different aspects of music make them feel can help them to become more self-aware and empathetic.

Musical elements

Musical elements combine to make music sound in particular ways and express feelings and ideas. You can discuss with children the ways in which different elements affect feelings. But remember there are no right answers. Even if one song makes you feel sad, it might make someone else feel angry. Try some of

the following starting points:

- Are the children making long or short sounds? (duration)
- Is the music loud or quiet? Can they sing more loudly? Can they play really quietly? (dynamics)
- Is the music high or low? (pitch) Some recorded music may be pitched wrongly for children’s voices.
- Children will reflect different aspects of the music when moving or accompanying it – some will clap to the beat, others to the rhythm and some will appear to be responding much more randomly. Don’t worry too much about this. They will learn from others and some apparent failure to follow the pattern of the sound may simply be children choosing to be playful and creative

(pulse, rhythm and tempo)

- Observe as children improvise with voice, instrument or body. They are likely to employ structures they are familiar with, repeating chorus, short verses, etc (structure)
- Encourage children to comment on the quality of sound, the element that enables us to distinguish between guitars and violins. Can they make a lion’s voice or a witch’s voice? What kind of voice might a car have if it could talk? (timbre)

Instruments

There’s no need to worry too much about getting the names of instruments right – can all the adults you know distinguish between a trumpet and a flugelhorn? Children

will often, for example, call a ukulele a guitar – you can give them the real name, but also draw attention to the similar features of the two instruments. Encourage them to think about which sounds made by different instruments might best represent different feelings.

Styles and genres

Different types of music can be found to signal happiness or sadness, anger or comfort. Children’s responses may be idiosyncratic, often based on cultural preferences that may be established even before birth. It is important that all children learn tolerance, introducing them to a wide range of music to prevent them becoming too focused on any one style.