

“LET’S START AT THE VERY BEGINNING”: USE OF PERCUSSION IN MUSICAL PLAY

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Children begin with ideal musical circumstances. They have been surrounded with rhythm, and the melodious sounds of their mother’s voice long before birth. Mothers and lots of fathers everywhere make music informally while caring for their infants. The challenge for parents, early childhood teachers and music educators is to build on this musical foundation rather than beginning anew. Small children are most interested in “multi-modal performances” combining song, gesture and movement.

Children learn through whole body experiences. A new born baby needs warmth, nearness, lots of face to face playful experiences, touching, rhythmic sounds and movement. Musical experiences should begin where the individual is, adding form to formless activities: beginning, middle end. For example: A baby or group of babies in a music class feel the beat as they are carried in parent’s arms to “Walk, walk, walk, when the drum says walk, when the drum says stop we STOP!” They experience moving musically together. They feel the beginning, middle and end of the activity and learn to anticipate the stop.

Babbling games are highly rhythmic. The baby learns to organise rhythm through such vocalising babble games long before s/he can clap, pat, or stamp a rhythm such as Baa, ba,ba baa. Pre verbal and/or non-verbal games can either substitute for language, or accompany it. All the elements of music can be introduced to the young child through echo games using the babbling sounds of babies. When a parent engages the baby in playful, musical vocalising games, her “baa baa, baa” can incorporate a range of low to high pitches, soft or loud, fast or slow. Through such games the baby learns to express his or her own personal place in the world through musical play. Babies learn through musical interaction as they take turns, or join in musical expression.

Older children, say from about three years, enjoy playing babbling echo games sitting around together bouncing a rainbow ring as they feel the beat, listen and copy the vocal patterns. Floor play is vital for all children to explore rhythmic play, through repetition, body percussion and rainbow ring activities. We can use body percussion to engage children, to motivate them and to maintain and extend focus and concentration. Through musical play and body percussion children experience a sense of belonging accompanied by joy and success.

Nursery rhymes, such as “Humpty Dumpty” can be played sitting around the rainbow ring. Children feel the beat as everyone moves the ring in time. They move their hands across the ring for the word “wall” and all lie down holding onto the ring for the word “fall”. When words such as these are exaggerated through dramatic pauses and actions, children learn to anticipate and supply words for ends of phrases, to know where the commas and full stops of language occur. Nursery rhymes are a valuable source of rhythmic patterns including walking beat, running, galloping, dotted rhythm skipping

patterns. Nursery rhymes have a natural musical form that provides consistency, helping children anticipate and practise sequences of an activity.

Use of a wide range of vocal inflections, dramatic pauses, exploration of chanting using very high and very low voices helps children to explore a wide range of musical expression. “Incey wincey spider”: Start with a baby spider using a very high voice. The mother spider will have a middle register voice. The daddy spider will have a very low voice.

Stories such as “Hairy McLarey From Donaldson’s Dairy” can be acted out around the ring. Each dog character has a specific movement. Hairy McLarey can have a predictable bouncing action. Everyone lies down holding onto the ring for Hercules Morse. Muffin McLay can be a side to side action of the rainbow ring across the tops of legs. Bitzer Malloney can be tapped using the rainbow ring on knees, and Schnitzel von Krum tapped down on ankles. When all the children have mastered the actions around the rainbow ring and have an obvious mastery for beat, then the story can be adapted to the use of instruments.

Musical experiences should begin where the individual is. Respect the child’s natural pace, pitch and rhythmic offerings. Follow the child in order to come into synchrony with the child. Then your child can come into synchrony with you. This is the basis of musical interaction. Enjoy every aspect of musical play and be patient.

When using musical instruments:

- Think of the environment you are working in and consider noise levels
- Know the children’s sensory likes and dislikes
- Consider children’s emotional responses
- Consider language learning difficulties
- Know the children’s interests (favourite songs, stories, numbers, colours)
- Provide children with the time, space and freedom for creative discovery
- Be open to what young children can teach us about teaching and learning music
- Use natural materials such as stones, leaves, flax, rakau, driftwood, shells
- Help children to create visual rhythmic patterns: set out leaves, shells, in the following patterns: leaf, leaf, au-tumn leaf. Shell, li-ttle shell, shell. List-ten to the au-tumn leaves. Play these patterns with the accompanying leaves, shells, driftwood and other found sounds. Children naturally experience soft and louder sounds as they explore and play together.
- Move together listening to the rhythmic pattern of feet: Walk, walk, walk, walk, running, running, running, running, walk, walk, running, walk. Play echo games using drums. Each child in a circle creates a simple rhythmic pattern everyone copies.

Start each music session with calming activities, gradually building to more arousing music interaction that allows for flexible, creative expression. End with slow calming music.

Remember:

- Respect
- Follow
- Be patient
- Play
- Enjoy

Reference:

Wylie, J.C. Foster-Cohen, S, Shand L, Kidd, V. The Champion Centre. 2008. *Help Me to Sing My Song*. Autism New Zealand National Conference, Christchurch.