

Beyond 'twinkle twinkle' – music experiences in child care

by Phillip Rowell

Human beings, from infancy, possibly possess an innate ability to appreciate music (Yim, 2007, p.12).

The role of musical experiences, and the appreciation and awareness of musical concepts such as rhythm, beat and tone, have long been recognised as an integral component of a child care program.

This is because music is an essential ingredient in children's development. From improving cognition, self-esteem, physical coordination and critical thinking skills to solving problems, recognising emotions and understanding relationships, the effect of music on the lives of children is profound.

It is a vehicle through which children can actively engage with their peers, adults and the environment. This engagement is an 'essential ingredient of quality early childhood curriculum' and helps to improve children's attention span, mental activity and spurs their creativity (Laevers as cited in Niland, 2007, p.7).

Music is part of a culture's narrative or story. Artists, composers, lyricists and choreographers have used music to communicate a time, place, event and an emotion for thousands of years. Music therefore, is intrinsically linked to storytelling. Chanting, rhyming, singing, dancing and playing musical instruments have been, and continue to be, used by many traditional and modern cultures. For example, Indigenous Australians use chants and dance to tell stories of the Dreamtime, while certain musical instruments can

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.3, 3.5 – 3.7, 4.4 and 4.5
OSHCQA Principles:	1.2, 4.2, 4.3 and 5.1 – 5.4
QIAS Principles:	4.1, 4.3 – 4.6, 6.4 and 6.5

be associated with a culture or nation such as the didgeridoo (Australia), bagpipes (Scotland) or sitar (India).

Child care professionals should acknowledge that children bring 'an inherited repertoire of songs, rhymes and games learned or mimicked from family, friends and siblings' to the child care setting (Klopper, 2008, p.1). Children and their families are a rich source of information about how to celebrate their culture through music, and they should be actively encouraged to contribute to the service's musical experiences and program.

Understanding the developmental benefits of music

Multiple Intelligence Theory identifies musical (or rhythmical) intelligence as one of the eight ways in which people process information based on their experiences. Rhythmical intelligence includes the recognition of rhythm, tone, beat and melody, and the pattern of sounds and vibrations created by the environment, speech and musical instruments.

Music affects children's moods, energises their spirit and prepares them for action. It can switch the brain on and activate it for learning; or as one neuroscientist reported after studying children's brain scans: 'when children read words the language centres of their brain light up...but when they read music the entire brain "lights up like a Christmas tree"' (Wilson as cited in Beaty, 2006, p.96). Further research shows that the brain is more receptive to learning when music is at 60 beats per minute because it changes a child's brain wave patterns to 'optimal brain-waves states for learning' (Egle, 2005, p.72). And because music stimulates emotions, it helps to synchronise the two hemispheres of the brain, which motivates children to learn through exploration and experimentation.



Music can also help to reduce stress, relieve tension and balance emotions – a slow, repetitive musical beat can help to regulate a person's heart and breathing rates to a state of relaxation, while humming a tune generates soothing vibrations similar to those the body naturally produces. Who hasn't marvelled at the calming effect rocking, patting and humming a lullaby can have on a tired baby or distressed child?

Similarly musical compilations, which mix musical instrumentation with the calm, ambient sounds of nature such as whale songs or forest sounds, are widely used as a relaxation technique in services to prepare children for rest.

Planning for music in children's play and learning programs

As an art form, music guides children to engage with their world and create meaning from their experiences. Music should be part of a multi-disciplinary approach to children's development, and as such, children's musical experiences should be integrated with other learning experiences. For example, playing different styles of music during art/craft sessions such as easel painting or collage; singing songs and rhymes to accompany stories from picture books; or using dance, movement and circle games to explore maths and science concepts.

Programs should provide opportunities for children to spontaneously engage in music, and environments need to be abundant in musical and rhythmic activities. Balance these experiences so that children are exposed to a range of auditory and visual sensations which support them to identify changes in beat, tone, rhythm and volume.

Continuously loud and energetic musical experiences can create chaotic and frenzied environments where children have little opportunity to consolidate their learning and rest (and it can be argued that the musical value of 'silence' is just as important for children to recognise and appreciate). Therefore, mix stimulating activities like group time instrument playing, singing and circle games, with relaxing experiences which encourage relaxation and self-expression such as music complementing yoga or Tai Chi.

Strategies to enrich programs with musical experiences include:

- Singing directions to help children to learn the service's procedures and routines
- Using everyday objects and materials for

Music plays an important role in children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development by:

- Stimulating active listening skills
- Encouraging literacy and phonemic awareness
- Promoting gross motor coordination, control and spatial awareness through movement and dance, such as crawling, stretching, running, skipping, jumping and hopping
- Fostering creativity and imagination through experimenting with different objects and materials to create sound, rhythm and beat
- Encouraging the discussion and expression of feelings
- Establishing a foundation for mathematical concepts such as reasoning and 'sequential and ordinal thinking' (Klopper, 2008, p.2).

music experiences. For example, a bucket can transform into a drum or wooden blocks can be used as tapping sticks

- Providing opportunities for children to listen to songs in other languages and watch people dance to different types of music
- Providing opportunities for children to record and listen to their musical compositions and singing
- Establishing a music centre including drums, tambourines, triangles, rhythm sticks, shakers, tone blocks, CDs and microphones, or other objects and materials which make sounds such as pots and wooden spoons
- Singing rhymes to help children understand their bodies, feelings, relationships, the world and math/science concepts such as counting
- Planning group singing time or engaging in spontaneous one-to-one singing during children's experiences
- Encouraging older children to create bands or put on musical shows for peers and adults.

Examples of other musical include:

- Making up new words for familiar songs and rhymes or to accompany children's picture books
- Using hand clapping games to explore beat and rhythm
- Creating 'progressive relaxation' journeys where an adult tells a story using sounds and children use their listening skills to imagine the story. This can be particularly useful as a behaviour guidance strategy for a child who needs time to calm down and settle

- Using finger rhymes with babies and toddlers, especially during routines such as nappy changing, toileting and mealtimes, to reinforce concepts such as colours, shapes and parts of the body
- Using music to create made up stories. For example, using the sounds of the city and the beach to tell a story about a child travelling from home to the seaside
- Dancing to music with different props and materials such as scarves or balloons
- Recording environmental sounds such as animals, weather, cars and trains for children to listen to, identify and discuss.

Incorporating music into everyday experiences

Music can also be used in conjunction with routines and transitions because it encourages children to follow rules, cooperate and improve long-term memory recall. For example, songs about hygiene procedures can help children to follow recommended practices such as handwashing before mealtimes or after going to the toilet. Upbeat, buoyant and bouncy music like marching music can energise children to finish a task such as packing away. This can be a helpful way to transition children between activities.

Music experiences also require knowledgeable child care professionals who are prepared to share their expertise, to learn and take on new challenges – and at times, be prepared to re-evaluate their own skills, beliefs or fears relating to music. Adults should not feel embarrassed if they sing out



of tune or lack the confidence to facilitate the 'perfect' music session. As Janet Gonzalez states, 'music is an open-ended creative experience rather than a formal lesson or a 'performance' (2008, p.429). Children are usually more than delighted when adults join them in creating music, singing a made-up song or transforming an every day object into an instrument.

Conclusion

Promoting the development of musical and rhythmic intelligence is an important component in early and middle child care programs and environments. Child care professionals can integrate a range of music-activities into the program and everyday routines and learning experiences to enrich children's lives ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

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