

Elements of a Musical Foundation for Children

by Rebecca Freeman

Knowing a few key activities for incorporating music into a child's routine can be both valuable and fun. Even someone not musically trained can provide a musical environment for children to explore and express themselves. Beats and rhythm, timing and tempo, dynamics and tonality, independent finger exercises, and musical patterns all can be taught while enjoying singing, instruments, and movement. Music is a creative process and children exposed to music at an early age will reap the benefits.

Beats

The easiest way to teach steady beats is to teach the heart-beat. It is a beat children have been listening to their entire lives.

- Bouncing or swaying an infant to a beat is the best way for them to feel it with their bodies.
- For older children, have them hold their hand to their chest to feel the heartbeat, then tap their chest with each beat.
- Once they feel the rhythm, you can lead a march around the room in the same time as the heartbeat.
- Once children have mastered the steady beat, you can have them run around the room to increase their heart rate and feel how their heartbeat is faster but still steady.

Exposure to many different beats is important for a child's musical foundation. In music we call this change of beat the 'timing' or 'time signature.' People are most familiar with the 'one-two' beat that we call 'duple time.' This is a 'strong-weak strong-weak' beat that matches that of the heart or a clock. Starting in infancy we hear this beat starting with our mother's heartbeat. That makes this beat familiar and comforting for us to listen to. If children are not exposed to other beats early on they will have a harder time enjoying

different beats or modeling them, knocking their sense of timing off.

The easiest way to figure out if a beat is in an even time (duple or quadruple) is to determine if the beat has an 'up-down up-down' sound or a marching sound. Move your pointer finger 'up-down up-down' with the beat to see if it matches. To emphasize this beat with children, marching around in a circle works well, making sure your footsteps are loud enough to set the example for the children.

Another familiar beat to introduce to children is the 'one-two-three' beat otherwise known as 'triple time.' This beat can be rearranged with the weak and strong parts of the beat, but it will always have three parts, 'strong-weak-weak' 'weak-strong-weak' or 'weak-weak-strong.'

- The easiest way to discover this beat is to take your pointer finger again and instead of going 'up-down up-down' move it around in a circular motion and see if it matches the beat.
- To actively strengthen children's ability to recognize this beat, make big arm circles and again let the children feel the beat with their body.
- When leading a song, you should always seek to reinforce the duple and triple time by conducting with your pointer finger either in 'up-down' or circular motions.

Tempo

A fun challenge for children is to ask them, "Do you think we can do that faster?" They love getting excited and silly trying to go faster and faster. This is the most basic way to teach tempo to children. *Tempo* is the musical term for how fast or slow a song is played.

- Speeding up a familiar song a bit each time allows children to see a progression and find the difference between fast and slow.
- Usually it is best to start by getting faster and then try it slowly, allowing everyone a chance to breathe.



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- End the session by returning to the normal pace at which the song is supposed to be sung or played.
- You can speed or slow a song by incorporating full body movement. Tiptoeing, marching, or running around a circle to the speed of a song is a great reinforcement of tempo.

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- To get children's attention, adults often will only use two voice channels: talking and shouting.
- Adults should also learn how to use their voice channels effectively.

- By whispering, a teacher can quickly settle a room of curious students to listen to the secret message.
- By singing, the teacher encourages children to happily sing along.

Dynamics

Teaching dynamics — or loud and quiet sounds — to children is a great way to add drama and character to a classroom. It is natural to get louder when something is exciting, so be aware that by increasing the volume you will be winding the children up, and it will be important to bring them back down.

- Some children need to burn energy first in order to then refocus and be able to concentrate, so often it is good to sing or play loud.
- If working with quiet or shy children, a good trick is to start with a quiet dynamic. For example, you could say, "Let's do this really quietly." This allows children a chance to practice the task without the pressure of failing or putting themselves out there before they are confident. Starting really quiet and building up the volume slowly encourages the shy child to get louder with the group so he can be more successful.
- If playing instruments such as shakers, you can play loud above your head in big movements and play quiet down low in very small movements.
- A common mistake among children is that singing loudly means shouting. If shouting in a song occurs, the best solution is to stop and kindly, but firmly, say that shouting is not singing.

Voice Channels

Children begin learning the different voice channels early in life, so remind them that shouting, whispering, talking, and singing are all different. A good way to reinforce this is to take a familiar song and say the words using each of the different voice channels to reinforce the changes and distinctions in the child's mind. This lesson may need to be repeated several times before a clear distinction is made, but this is a foundational lesson and worth the extra effort. Once children can differentiate between the voice channels, they will feel more confident and be more successful in following instructions.

Teaching children to differentiate between loud and quiet, and the different voice channels will give them a practical head start to music.

Sounds and Styles

Exposure to different beats, tempos, and dynamics are important, but so is exposure to different types of sounds. Major and minor songs are the most common sounds people are exposed to.

- Major songs are generally delightful and happy sounding.
 - These are most used for children's songs.
 - This is the sound that people take the most pleasure in simply because that is what they are most exposed to in life.
- Minor songs can sound sad, spooky, and mysterious.
 - Minor songs are the other common tonality most people are familiar with.
 - Minor songs contain a greater number of chords and harmonies than major songs.

To leave exposure to music to these two tonalities alone would greatly limit the vastness of music. Another semi-familiar sound is the Pentatonic or the five-tone scale. We hear this pentatonic sound in folk music and the music of some cultures. The Blues genre of music is different again, but also familiar to many.

Musical styles and tastes are debated among adults today. The reason is that there are some sounds people just cannot stand to listen to. This results from the exposure they had as they developed their own sense of tonality.

With children it can be very tempting to stick to the familiar and favorite children's music. However, by limiting children's music to a few CDs, you may be limiting them to a narrow genre taste as adults. Musicians who are familiar with the research on how musical taste develops are accommodating this by offering a wide variety of child-friendly songs based in the many genres of music: Jazz, rock, blues, classi-

cal, country, Irish folksongs, and Spanish dances, to name a few. The list is endless as to what is available for children today. When children are exposed to different genres of music, they grow up with a better ear and tolerance for unusual sounds and hold a greater appreciation for music in general.

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Critical and Creative Thinking

Music and creativity go hand in hand. Music is a natural way to express a variety of ideas and emotions. Problem-solving skills and memory retention are two of the basic benefits a person experiences by learning music. To build up this sort of critical thinking, teachers can assess children's musical development in the following way:

- **Ear Training:** This develops their musical ear to recognize different rhythms and sounds and to imitate them. This ear training skill is foundational to musical instruction. Making a copycat game is a great way to introduce this skill.
 - Play or make a rhythm or beat and encourage children to play it back. You can tap sticks, shake bells, or even slap cheap colorful bug swatters on the floor.
 - Sing a pattern of notes to see if children can listen and repeat the pattern back. For the non-musical teacher the easiest way to teach this is to copy bits and pieces of familiar songs. Try "Hot Cross Buns," a song that has E, D, C, as the first musical notes in a stepping-down pattern.
 - To help young children understand the movement of pitch going up and down, you can move your body up and down as you sing the pattern.
 - To help children be successful, it is best not to make patterns too long. As children become more capable you can challenge them with longer phrases.
 - Singing a pattern using simple sounds like 'la' or 'bum' allows children to focus on the change of notes rather than the words.
 - Allowing children to come up with a pattern for the teacher to copy is also a great way to boost confidence and creativity.
- **Substitution:**
 - To mix up the pattern game or to draw out shy children you can substitute words like 'mom,' 'dog,' or 'green.'

- In familiar songs, start changing the words on the spot. For example, in the familiar song "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," substitute the words for something like 'blue' and sing the one word over and over again to the tune.
- Ask children what color — animal, food, toy, or family member — they would like to sing about.

■ Movement:

- To encourage movement, gracefulness, and creativity, lead the children in inventing actions for songs that do not have any. For example, if the song is about a car, drive a car. If it's about an animal, be that animal.
- Provide scarves and ribbons to dance with — opening the door for children to explore and express themselves. Scarves can be thrown, waved, become hats and capes, or twirled around.
- To encourage children's creativity, teachers should lead them in discovering new ways to move. Skipping, jumping, twirling, hopping on one foot are all fun. For infants and toddlers unsteady on their feet, pick them up and bounce them around. Also, remember that an adult copying a child's movement is a great confidence booster.

Conclusion

Incorporating music into the classroom is an important part of young children's experiences. Children, beginning in infancy, can be introduced to the importance and benefits of music. Early exposure is the key with music. In implementing musical activities described here you can help launch children into the world with a solid musical foundation.

Resources

Music programs that cater to childhood music exposure are:

- The Music Class® — Child's Music and Movement Classes www.themusicclass.com
- Music For Young Children® — The High Note In Music Learning www.myc.com

For the research behind early exposure and the benefits of music in general:

- Don Campbell, *The Mozart effect: Tapping the power of music to heal the body, strengthen the mind and unlock creative spirit* (2001, Harper)