

# Music Play

## Creating Centers for Musical Play and Exploration

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Music is in the air in Ms. Viola's Head Start classroom. She has a large collection of CDs, most of which were recorded specifically for children. Music often plays in the background during greeting, snack, choice, and nap times.

Music is in use in Mr. Kerry's pre-K classroom. "Piggyback" songs remind children of expected behaviors and add a pleasant dose of calm to transitions that might otherwise become chaotic.

Music is on the lips of Mrs. Rosetti's kindergartners. Morning circle begins with a greeting song, followed by children's selection of two more songs from the class's impressive repertoire. Afternoon circle is the time for learning and practicing new songs.

Each of these teachers might say, "My classroom is very musical," and each is providing something of value.



The presence of music in young children's lives can sometimes be taken for granted. In most early childhood classrooms, teachers and children sing a song or two at circle time. Many teachers use musical strategies to help children handle transitions (for example, singing "We're cleaning up our room, we're cleaning up our room, we're putting all the blocks away, we're cleaning up our room" to the tune of "The Farmer in the Dell"). Parents often sing lullabies and traditional rhymes to their young children. At home and in the car, parents play recorded music they themselves enjoy. They may play a "kid's" tape or CD to keep the children happy and occupied on the road. Music certainly is present in the lives of many young children.

Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness that music is underused and underaddressed in early childhood education (Kenney 1997). In the early years, musical aptitude is still developing. Infancy and early childhood are prime

**Infancy and early childhood are prime times to capitalize on children's innate musical spontaneity, and to encourage their natural inclinations to sing, move, and play with sound.**

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times to capitalize on children's innate musical spontaneity, and to encourage their natural inclinations to sing, move, and play with sound (Stellacio & McCarthy 1999).

Why does music not receive deeper attention in early childhood education? Teachers may not recognize the full value and potential of providing for children's musical development and may not understand the many ways musical involvement can enhance development and learning in other areas. They may believe that musical development is important only for a small number of highly talented children. They may be intimidated by the specialized expertise of music educators or inhibited by their own lack of knowledge about music education or a perceived lack of musicianship. NAEYC and MENC (National Association of Music Education [formerly the Music Educators National Conference], [www.menc.org](http://www.menc.org)) are collaborating to promote the full inclusion of music in early childhood curriculum.

Music permeates the very fiber of Ms. Katie's preschool class. During choice time, she watches and listens as Shira and Maxwell play with a new double set of handbells. The children discover that two of the bells sound exactly alike. She waits to see if they will continue to try to match pitches, then prompts, "I wonder if there are other pairs that sound alike." The two children search for more bells with matching sounds. After finding a second match, the children note with interest that bells that sound alike are also identical in color. Their theory is confirmed when they ring two yellow bells and find them identical in pitch.

Now Ms. Katie steps in with a challenge. She sets up a screen on the table between the two sets of bells and says, "Do you think you can match pitches without seeing the colors?" Maxwell and Shira eagerly respond to her cue and engage in constructive musical play for another ten minutes.

Ms. Katie intentionally incorporates and facilitates musical development through planned opportunities for play. She also includes plenty of group singing, spontaneous and planned incorporation of music throughout the day, and purposeful integration of a wide variety of high-quality musical recordings of many genres. She appreciates the multifaceted possibilities of music in a developmentally appropriate early childhood program.

### Musical play

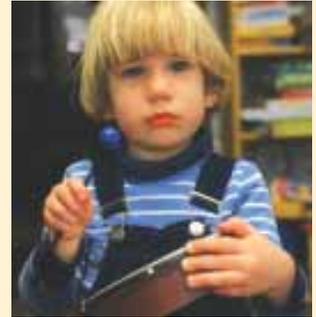
Young children engage in music as play (Moorhead & Pond 1978; Neelly 2001). Though many early childhood educators may not consider themselves musicians or music educators, they generally do feel comfortable with the medium of play.

When offered a variety of drums and strikers, children play with sound.

**Young children engage in music as an exploratory activity, one that is interactive, social, creative, and joyful.**

## A Good Early Childhood Music Program Helps Children Learn to . . .

- Sing tunefully
- Move expressively and rhythmically
- Play classroom instruments
- Develop age-appropriate musical concepts
- Create music
- Value music as part of everyday life
- Listen appreciatively
- Develop the following attitudes: I can . . .
  - listen to music
  - understand music
  - write music
  - play music
  - respond to music with my body
  - create music



Source: Isenberg & Jalongo 1993, 109.

By exploring and "messing around," they discover they can make one sound by striking one drum and a different sound by striking another. Their drum play is supported because adults expect and allow for the "noise."

When young children hear music, they move to it. Supportive adults share their joy and delight in their fun, also listening and moving in response to the music. Once children learn to sing, they create their own melodies and invent their own words to familiar songs. Their song play is supported when adults demonstrate authentic interest, interact with children through song, and engage in their own playful song making.

Play is central to early childhood education (Monighan-Nourot, Scales, & Van Hoorn 1987; Bredekamp & Copple 1997), and it is a primary vehicle for musical growth (Kenney 1997). When early childhood teachers recognize the playful nature of children's musical activity, music education may look more like familiar territory. Young children engage in music as an exploratory activity, one that is interactive, social, creative, and joyful.

Because young children engage in music as play, it makes sense to offer musical activities during choice time. Most early childhood classrooms have areas for dramatic play, building with blocks, reading books, and creating art. Why not a music center? Providing a center for musical activities is not an idea invented by the authors (see Moomaw 1997 and Andress 1998 for further examples of musical play activities). It is, however, an idea that is seldom implemented in early childhood classrooms. Most preschool programs offer few opportunities for exploring and experimenting with musical sound (Golden 1990; Tarnowski & Barrett 1992). Many of the musical play ideas described in preschool curriculum guides are in fact highly teacher directed and controlled, with narrowly defined expectations and possibilities.

Play is voluntary and intrinsically motivated, whether the motivation is curiosity, affiliation, mastery, or something else. Play is episodic, characterized by emerging and shifting goals that children develop spontaneously and flexibly (Fromberg 1999). Opportunities for musical play are often sacrificed to teacher-controlled activities (Dorman 1990; Tsunady 2001). As a result, the musical experiences offered in early childhood programs can constrain musical creativity because there is too much teacher control and monitoring; children cannot make their own choices about what to do (Rohwer 1997).

### Teachers' roles

Teachers do much more to support play than simply allow it to happen. Vygotskian theory describes the role of sociocultural context in child development (Berk & Winsler 1995). From this social-constructivist perspective, children learn through supported interactions with more competent "others"—typically older children or adults. The term *scaffolding* refers to the continuum of supportive structuring that more competent others provide as a child masters a new strategy or skill. As

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the child internalizes the role of the other and is increasingly able to perform independently, support is gradually withdrawn. This perspective is in contrast to the image of the lone child testing, trying, assimilating, and accommodating in a social vacuum.

From a social-constructivist perspective, adults have to do more than set the stage—for music or play—by providing space, time, and materials. There's much more to supporting children's musical development than just pushing the play button on a CD player. When young children have a rich musical environment along with appropriate guidance from adults, they can learn, for example, to imitate and, with increasing precision, distinguish among rhythm and tone patterns (Gordon 1997).

Teachers play multiple roles in supporting children's play activities (Isenberg & Jalongo 1993). They must

**plan**—set the stage and decide how to introduce new materials in inviting ways.

**observe**—watch to see how children interact with the materials and each other. Determine if children need help to solve a problem; look for teachable moments.

**participate**—share and enjoy music and play with children, rather than direct the play or perform for them.

**extend**—look for the right time to enhance children's exploration by asking a well-chosen—and often open-ended—question, adding a new piece of equipment, or interjecting an idea for consideration.

**model**—join in and demonstrate a new behavior non-intrusively, via parallel play. When adults model movement to music while also describing their actions and offering suggestions, children engage in more differentiated and synchronized movement (Metz 1989).

**motivate**—encourage children to take part in the play. This role is particularly important to consider when working with children with certain disabling conditions. Young children with mental retardation, for example, may not spontaneously choose to engage with play materials and need to be motivated through social or even tangible reinforcement, to become involved in playful activity (Carta et al. 1991).

## Inventing Music Play Centers

“A Good Early Childhood Music Program Helps Children Learn to . . .” (see p. 31) lists general information on developmentally appropriate musical knowledge that can be taught during the early childhood years. When considering the following music play center ideas—offered as examples to stir the reader’s imagination—keep in mind the aims and objectives found in this box, as well as the self-directed nature of play and the wide range of ways that teachers may support young children’s play.

### Using pipe phones

**Materials:** Purchase segments of PVC pipe at a hardware store, and attach them so they form an arc of the size needed to reach from a child’s mouth to her or his ear. Provide the pipe in a listening center with a tape player and recorded music that is easy for young children to sing (simple rhythms, a range of C to G or A, and simple lyrics with repetitive phrases).

**Supporting play:** The pipe isolates the child’s voice, allowing the child to simultaneously listen to the music and hear his or her own voice clearly. This provides opportunities for each child to adjust his singing voice to match or harmonize with the recordings. Pipe phones can be helpful for children with attention deficits or children with hearing impairments.

Have children put one hand on their throat as they sing. This will help them feel the vibration of their vocal chords at the same time their voice is isolated and amplified through the pipe phone.



### Identifying instruments

**Materials:** Create a center with various instruments on a shelf and a screen large enough that two children can sit, one on each side, without seeing one another.

**Supporting play:** After children have had ample opportunity to explore the instruments, demonstrate how to play a guessing game by first examining and listening to several instruments, and then hiding them behind the screen. Have one child play an instrument behind the screen, while another tries to identify the instrument by its unique sound (timbre). To simplify, provide instruments with very different timbres. To extend the challenge of the activity, provide instruments with similar timbres.

### Creating musical compositions

**Materials:** Provide a portable keyboard or piano or xylophone/glockenspiel and some paper, markers, and stickers. To the keys corresponding to the middle two octaves, teachers should affix removable stickers of various shapes and sizes, such that each key has a unique sticker.

To simplify, affix stickers only to keys middle C to G. To extend, include more keys. To make a pentatonic scale or five-note scale, put an x on the F and B piano keys (or remove the F and B xylophone bars) so children won’t play these notes. When two children play instruments adjusted to this scale, anything they play together sounds good.

### Dancing and movement

**Materials:** Hang full-length Plexiglas mirrors on a wall or in a corner. Provide a wide variety of music on continuous loop tape to encourage movement and dance—classical waltzes, contemporary, traditional folk dance melodies. Props can help some children feel comfortable and get started dancing. For example, children can use doll partners (large rag dolls with tennis shoes or dish detergent bottle dolls with flowing skirts) or ribbon or crepe paper streamers (attached to cardboard paper towel rolls or shower rings for safety). Observe children’s use of props to make sure they are not distracting children from the music and its connection to their movement.

**Supporting play:** Play along. If children seem stuck, play beside them. Model different movements and describe your actions. To get into the swing, children can view short video clips of various kinds of dancing, such as Irish step dancing (like “Riverdance”), ballet, jazz, or tango. Provide the opportunity for children to perform for others if they choose. For a child with visual impairment, the provision of a barre, stable chair back, or shoulder to lean on can provide a sense of security in dance and movement activities.

**Supporting play:** As children create their own music, encourage them to “write” it down for future reference. They can copy the stickers corresponding to the notes they use, or place identical stickers on a piece of paper. Encourage children to play their own (or their peers’) notated music. Children can also invent their own systems of musical notation. For children with limited motor coordination, the striking surface of xylophone bars may be too narrow. Substitute a metallophone, bass xylophone, or single tone bars that can be spread out.

(continued on p. 34)

## Exploring bells

*Materials:* Provide a collection of bells of various types and sizes—resonator bells, tubular bells, handbells, jingle bells, and so on.

*Supporting play:* Encourage children to touch, shake, ring, and otherwise experiment with the bells. Extend the play by encouraging children to compare, contrast, categorize, and sequence the bells. Provide graph paper, blank paper, and crayons for those who want to document their findings. For children who have difficulty grasping the instruments, attach adjustable Velcro straps.



## Making and shaking maracas

*Materials:* Offer paper plates, empty soda cans, plastic cups, pie tins, paper towel rolls. (Be sure the soda cans have no sharp edges.)

Provide materials to pour inside them, such as rice, sand, pennies, small jingle bells, marbles, beans, and so on. Add a CD player and CDs with familiar songs.

*Supporting play:* Children can place their chosen materials between two paper plates or pie tins, then staple them together. Or they can fill empty soda cans, then put tape over the openings. Children can listen carefully and try to identify the materials in others' maracas. A children's marching band can play the maracas to accompany a familiar recorded song.

## Musical theater

*Materials:* Transform your dramatic play area into a stage by providing costumes, instruments, seating for the audience, tickets, a microphone (real or pretend), and so on.

*Supporting play:* Introduce the concept of a musical show by showing clips of a videotaped concert, such as *Cathy and Marcy's Song Shop* or *Raffi on Broadway*, or segments of a videotaped stage production. Encourage children to assume roles like ticket seller,

audience member, actor, musician, and announcer. A guitar will probably be a popular choice. For children who have difficulty with fine motor coordination, a guitar pick is difficult to grasp. A rubber doorstopper is a good substitute for a pick and will produce a louder sound than a young child's finger strumming.

## Exploring instruments from many cultures

*Materials:* Provide a variety of instruments from different cultures and countries. Remember to include instruments indigenous to regions of your own country. You might ask families to loan instruments and demonstrate their use, or inquire about borrowing instruments from music teachers or the music department of a local college. Include photos and perhaps maps (depending on developmental considerations) depicting the origins of each instrument. The Diagram Group (1997) publication *Musical Instruments of the World* may be a source of ideas.

*Supporting play:* Introduce the center and the instruments thoughtfully to ensure that children understand how to use them safely and respectfully. Allow children to explore and play in the instrument center two at a time. Guide children to compare and contrast the appearance and timbre (distinctive sound of a type of musical instrument) of different instruments. Children may enjoy comparing the different ways to change the sounds of various instruments.

## Musical jars

**Materials:** Provide several identical glass jars, each filled with the same amount of colored water. Provide a striker, a small pitcher of water, and some paper and crayons.

**Supporting play:** Encourage children to experiment with the sounds made by striking the jars. If the jars are

truly identical, they should all sound very similar. Suggest adding a little water to one of the glasses, then ask children to compare the sound made by striking that jar to the sound made by striking the other jars. You might prompt children to try to create a sequence of tones from low to high and then to create music or re-create

simple, familiar tunes on the jars. Children can draw a picture to represent their composition or to show the sequence of the jars.



## Recording sounds and music

**Materials:** Transform the dramatic play center into a recording studio. Discuss or read about places where records, tapes, and CDs are recorded. If possible, take a field trip to a recording studio. Then equip a center with instruments, tape recorders, microphones, and other recording props. Periodically change the instruments to introduce musical genres such as jazz, country, and classical. Offer markers and paper or software so children can make CD or audiotape labels.

**Supporting play:** Teach children how to use any real recording equipment before allowing them to play in the center. With the children's input, establish some ground rules for using the items. Encourage children to try out different instruments and record their sounds. After they play back the recorded sounds, ask children to think about whether and

how they want to change their recordings. Prompt them to consider which instruments they want to play alone, which to play together, and how to time the vocals. This constructive planning and editing may require a good deal of teacher support until children are either satisfied with the finished product or simply satisfied with ending the process. Children can share completed recordings with classmates and family.



## Playing different instruments

**Materials:** Provide one or two instruments per week in an instrument center—zither, child-size guitar, electronic keyboard, autoharp, shakere (gourd rattle), or whatever you have or can borrow.

**Supporting play:** Introduce the center and the instruments thoughtfully to ensure that children understand how to use them safely and respectfully. Model respect in your own handling of instruments. If you treat them like something very special, children will notice the aura of reverence. Allow two children at a time to explore and play in the instrument center. Observe carefully. If children get stuck on one way of using an instrument and/or leave the center after very brief exploration, they may simply be unaware of an instrument's potential. Engage in parallel play or more direct modeling to alert them to other ways to vary the instrument's sound.

## Get going

These center possibilities are offered as inspiration, a starting point. "Checklist for Creating a Music Play Center" provides some suggestions of things to consider to enhance the success of your centers. Think about the purposes and possibilities of music in early childhood programs. Think about the musical concepts and attitudes that young children can develop. Think about the purposes and nature of play and the variety of ways adults can serve as scaffolders to accommodate the needs, abilities, and interests of a diversity of children. Then play around and get creative! Readers can invent their own ideas for music play centers and introduce children to the joys of music.

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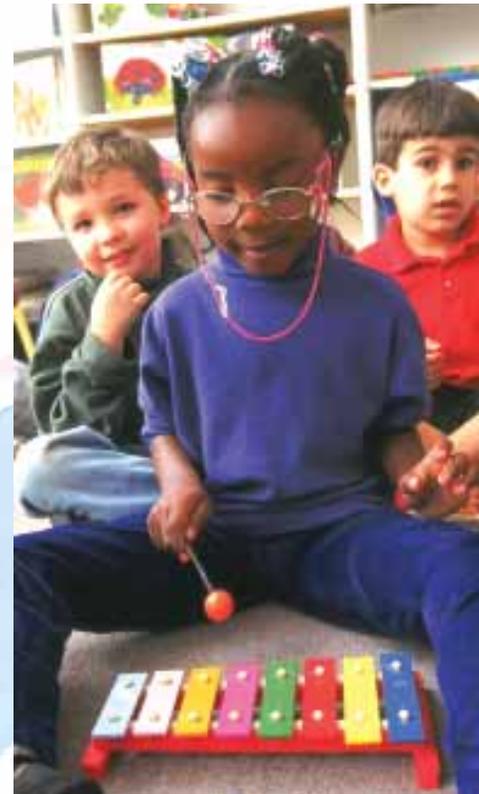
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## Checklist for Creating

### Determine goals and objectives

Do your goals and objectives

- Consider the children's interests?
- Coordinate with the overall curriculum, school district/center goals and objectives, and related state, NAEYC, and MENC standards?
- Reflect the teacher's long-range goals for infusion of music into other domains of learning and development?
- Respect and reflect the importance of music as a domain in its own right?
- Encourage children to experiment with sound and investigate means for music making?



### Define teacher's role

Do you . . .

- Include children in decision making regarding centers, using brainstorming and discussion?
- Encourage children to focus on particular musical elements using questions and comments?
- Consider the potential learning opportunities and plan a range of actions to scaffold those learnings (modeling, extending, adding props)?
- Set up a system of assessment (checklists, work samples such as children's musical notations, tape recordings, anecdotal records)?

### Establish a schedule

Do you . . .

- Allow children adequate time to explore materials and construct musical concepts? They will need blocks of uninterrupted time for complex and rich play.
- Provide children extended opportunities, over several weeks, to revisit materials, practice with them, and engage with them in new ways?
- Allow children to interact with materials, both individually and with other children?

## a Music Play Center

### Create a setting and provide materials

Do you . . .

- ✓ Use a divider or shelves to define the boundaries of the music center? Consider the flexibility a particular music center will have to mix with other centers. Clear boundaries help children keep music materials in the center and other materials out. Open up the boundaries to create more permeability and mixing of materials.
- ✓ Allot enough space to accommodate the number of children you expect will use the center?
- ✓ Position the center away from quieter areas of the classroom, such as centers for reading and writing?
- ✓ Rotate or add materials when the time is ripe to enrich children's play?
- ✓ Use an area rug to define the space, provide comfortable seating, and absorb excess sound?
- ✓ Hang pillows and sound-absorbing materials on the walls (carpet squares, a thick cloth tapestry made by the children) to further reduce excess sound?
- ✓ Display related pictures (musical instruments, art related to music) and relevant print (words to songs or chants, musical scores)?
- ✓ Provide a small storage cabinet with a tape or CD player and headphones?
- ✓ Organize storage so children can put materials away easily and safely (Peg-Board hooks, separate labeled bins, a coat or hat rack)?

### Make adaptations for special needs

Do you . . .

- ✓ Consider accessibility to the music center? Make sure all children can enter the center comfortably and access materials independently.
- ✓ Modify or adapt materials so children can use them in effective, satisfying, and safe ways?
- ✓ Consider grasp and fine motor manipulation as well as gross motor requirements?
- ✓ Address adaptive communication needs (for example, a communication board) for the music center as for other classroom areas?



- ✓ Consider structuring peer assistance through a buddy system, for children who might benefit from peer-scaffolded interaction with materials?
- ✓ Collaborate with an early childhood special educator and the child's parents if you need additional insight when planning your music center?

### Encourage positive behavior

Do you . . .

- ✓ Plan the location of the music center carefully? Consider the possibility of an outdoor music play center.
- ✓ Move and rearrange the center when you change its musical focus and content (for example, it could sometimes be an outdoor center)?
- ✓ Engage the children in setting basic ground rules?
- ✓ Teach appropriate use and care of materials? Start with durable materials.
- ✓ Set and communicate limits for the number of children who can use the center at one time?
- ✓ Separate music materials from things that could damage them (food, water, excessive sunlight)?

*Note: This checklist was inspired, in part, by ideas found in S. Moomaw's *More Than Singing: Discovering Music in Preschool and Kindergarten* (St. Paul, MN: Redleaf, 1997), 123–27.*

