Conversations about Young Audiences

Theater, Live Music, and Dance

Susan Friedman, senior editor at NAEYC, conducted the interviews about young children and the performing arts.

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What types of theater performances are appropriate for preschoolers? What might toddlers get out of a visit from a cellist who plays a song and demonstrates the different sounds she can make with her instrument? Would inviting a local jazz dance group to perform be beneficial for your early first-graders?

I spoke with a musician, the artistic director and associate artistic director of a children’s theater, an education director of an arts foundation, and a dance educator about what children get out of experiencing live theater, dance, and musical performances. Here, they explain the many types of performing arts experiences that make sense for young children of different ages.

Janet Stanford is artistic director and Kate Bryer is associate artistic director of Imagination Stage (www.ImaginationStage.org), a non-profit theater arts organization in suburban Washington, D.C., that produces programs for children.

What do children get from seeing a live theater performance?

Janet: Young children experience the art of storytelling differently than adults do. They live in a world of “let’s pretend.” The line between reality and play is not yet drawn. They can involve themselves in a performance mentally, emotionally, and physically (if permitted) without reservation. This is both an advantage and responsibility for artists who create work for this age group.

The fact that small children believe what they see means that artists and performers have to carefully lead children into and through an imaginative journey. A play might include strange, funny, even frightening things (perhaps a costume, mask, or loud noise), so it’s important to reassure first-time theatergoers that the theater is a safe place. It’s a place where the actors and audience can all pretend together. The young child must trust that there will be an ending that feels good.

Attending a play is a communal experience. The idea of many people, young and old, taking an imaginative journey together is fundamental to the premise of all live performance. There’s definitely something thrilling about sharing a live performance. Going to the theater is a special experience that doesn’t happen every day.

What are appropriate theater experiences for young children of different ages?

Janet: Most children’s theaters list a minimum age for the experience. Look for that, but also call the theater and ask if a particular performance is really appropriate for 4-year-olds or 3-year-olds or whatever is listed as the minimum age.

Toddlers and young preschoolers generally shouldn’t be expected to sit quietly for an extended period of time and watch a performance. They will almost certainly become bored and reluctant to attend a theater performance even when they are older. Very young children need to move around and participate. Appropriate theater experiences for toddlers and younger preschoolers are very participatory and they should be short, between 30 and 50 minutes. Most preschoolers (4 or 5) can enjoy a children’s play in a bigger theater for 60–75 minutes. Preschoolers begin to understand that...
there’s more than one way to tell a story. It can be extremely fun for them to watch an actor make a character they’ve known and loved in a book come to life.

**Kindergartners and children in the early primary grades** can usually enjoy a performance because they know it’s headed somewhere. It’s not that kindergartners and older children dislike audience participation, but the more books they’ve been reading and the longer they’ve been in school, the more they understand the sequencing of a story. They know that a story starts with a problem and works toward a solution. And the story engages them. By the time most children are 6, they begin to appreciate that characters have competing interests. They begin to see shades of gray. Watching conflict among the characters in a theater production can be a great way to introduce and talk about conflict resolution.

Many children’s theater performances contain some element of conflict. Why is this?

**Janet:** Most children’s theater artists agree that we want to end the story with a sense of hope—that’s very empowering to children—but we don’t want to shy away from conflict, because it is part of life. Parents and teachers should reassure children that the theater is a safe place where anything can happen but no one is ever really hurt. We go to experience a story told through professional pretenders called actors. Some parts of the story might be scary, but it’s normal to have fears.

It is an excellent preparation for life if children can experience something that’s a little scary in a story, observe how the characters confront what scares them, and then solve their problems and overcome their fears. It’s important to pay attention to the age guidelines, because the right amount of conflict for a first-grader will almost certainly be too much for a young preschooler. If you show children some scariness and allow them to process it in the theater, then they have that experience as a reference point.

**Tell us about the new theater program you’re developing for younger children.**

**Kate:** With a grant from the Doris Duke Foundation, we are developing a 30-minute theater program intended specifically for children age 2 to 4. It is a cross between a class and theatrical performance. In many ways it is like a theater performance: there’s the stage set, costumes, and props, and the actors are always in character. But it’s different because it’s interactive; the children can participate and move during the show itself. Children sit in a circle and the performance happens among them. We give each child a bag of props to use, including a piece of cloth they will transform into a butterfly and a small blinking light they will use as they pretend to be fireflies.

What about people who don’t have access in their area to an interactive theater that presents programs for very young children?

**Janet:** Many cities have puppet theaters and puppet shows for toddlers and preschoolers that can be good introductory theater experiences for very young children. The puppet stage is usually very small and often there is some audience participation. Also—and this is more for families than for teachers—it’s okay to take a child to the first 30 minutes of a performance and then leave. Why make a child sit still throughout an entire play if that particular child is not yet ready?
Cathy Fink is a musician and half of the children’s music duo Cathy Fink & Marcy Marxer (www.cathymarcy.com). The two perform nationally and internationally at performing arts centers, schools, and other venues.

What do young children get out of hearing live music?

Cathy: It’s hugely important that young children have the opportunity to hear live music. Many young children—toddlers, for example—may not understand that the music they hear from a radio, CD player, or MP3 player was originally created by a live person—that music doesn’t just come out of a box, that there’s not a small person in there. Live music is a living, breathing, and wonderful thing. When children experience a live performance, they will begin to understand that it takes a person and an instrument or a voice to create music.

Another important part of hearing live music is the value in just listening. Listening is doing something, and listening to live music can help young children build that skill.

There’s also a value in music for music’s sake and art for art’s sake. With the pressure to focus on academics, music sometimes gets overlooked. There’s plenty of research that shows that music supports the curriculum, but the real bonus is that we are honoring the emotional side of the child. It’s time to breathe. It’s time to say there is some beautiful music out there. There are beautiful sounds, instruments, voices, and words.

When you hear someone create music, something special happens. Music evokes emotions. When children hear live music, it resonates with them emotionally. There’s an old song called “Bread and Roses” in which the lyrics describe that workers need their bread, but they need their roses too. Music is like the roses. It brings beauty into our lives, and we all need that.

Listening to live music is also a community-building event, and there are many benefits to being part of a community. We experience something together. We can talk about it. We share that experience. Even for young children, when the community is their classroom, there’s something valuable about experiencing and enjoying music together.

How can teachers bring live music to the children in their programs?

Cathy: In this economy and with very young children, it’s not necessary to go on a field trip and bring children to an actual performance or hire an expensive group to visit your program. If there are parents in your program who play the piano or clarinet or violin, or who sing, I bet they’d be thrilled to come in and share their music and talk about it with the children. Ask the families in your program if they or someone they know plays an instrument. Inquire in the community. Go to your local arts council and invite individuals who play an instrument or who sing to visit your program.

What kinds of musical performances are appropriate for different age children?

Cathy: The youngest children will best appreciate music when it’s presented to them in small groups and for a short amount of time. If you invite a guest to introduce toddlers to the clarinet, arrange for that musician to visit for 15 minutes to play a song, demonstrate how the instrument works, and let children hold the instrument. Later, to enhance the experience, a teacher could play clarinet music on a CD—quiet music at nap time and some more energetic clarinet music during another time of day. Some 2-year-olds may not even be able to say the word clarinet, but they
The Performing Arts: Music, Dance, and Theater in the Early Years

For preschoolers, invite musicians to stay for 25 minutes. Preschoolers have more developed language skills, so they may have more questions to ask about the instrument and could listen to two songs, one at the beginning of the visit and another at the end. Preschoolers can also answer questions about the music, like “How did this song make you feel?”

Children in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade are ready for a longer, 30-minute visit. They will have more questions for the musician and will be able to listen to more songs. They can also learn about the music—for example, what’s a low note and what’s a high note—and can discuss what they noticed about the different songs the visitor played.

When are children ready to attend a musical performance?

Cathy: Many performance spaces weren’t built for young children. The adult-size chairs may not be comfortable for them, and they may not be able to even see the musicians. By the time children are in the early elementary grades, they are more comfortable with being an audience member. They can pay attention longer and can manage the seats and see the performers.

A child’s readiness for a concert is based on each child and of course the guidance they get from teacher, parent, or caregiver attending with them. The adult concert partner can do a lot to enhance the experience as well as teach children through modeling and discussion how to be a good audience member: Participate when appropriate, listen when appropriate, and show your appreciation when appropriate.

Teachers can also think about local venues that aren’t big performance spaces. For example, children could take a field trip to a nearby church and learn about and hear the organ.

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Dance

Miriam Flaherty Willis is senior director of education at the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts (www.wolftrap.org) in Vienna, Virginia. Rima Faber is executive director of the National Dance Education Organization (www.ndeo.org), located in Silver Spring, Maryland.

What are your thoughts on young children experiencing a dance performance?

Miriam: Many adults think that taking young children to a dance performance means taking them to see The Nutcracker. But rather than taking them to a large performance space that’s uncomfortable for them, with seats for adults, why not invite a local dance group to visit your program, or take a field trip to a nearby small dance studio? Children can get quite a lot out of experiencing a short dance performance. The images can be very powerful because dance is a form of nonverbal communication and storytelling.

What are the benefits of attending a dance performance for young children?

Rima: Dance is a magical art form, and children can appreciate watching dance on a stage in a live performance at approximately age 3. Some children are mature enough to handle it, and some need to gain greater self-control. The performance should be short, and the child should be introduced to audience etiquette in advance. Children innately understand the language of movement and can find great joy in watching dance. As nonverbal communication, dance teaches children to relate to movement symbols and, in essence, “read” dance movement. This promotes cognitive growth
Young Children

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as well as the pleasure of entertainment. A performance also encourages children to focus, concentrate, and appreciate what others can do.

What kind of dance performances are appropriate for young children?

Rima: Dance performance can have great humor, and even very young children understand humor in movement. Cultural dance forms such as Irish step dancing, African dance, or flamenco are fast paced and particularly enjoyable for all ages. World dance forms help children learn about people from a variety of backgrounds and to appreciate cultural differences. I can’t stress enough, though, that the main value of dance for young children is gained through active participation.

What can teachers do before or after the performance?

Miriam: Make the experience about the interaction between the children and the performers and not just about exposing them to dance. Children can ask questions and try to dance on their own afterward. Before the dance, the teacher or the performers can prepare the children for what they are going to see. Describe what the music will sound like. Explain that there will be costumes and that people will move their bodies to the music.

Talk to the children afterward. Let them try to dance on their own. Ask them open-ended questions:

• What did you see?
• What was it about?
• What was the stage setting (or lighting, music, or costumes) like?
• Was the dance happy? Sad? What emotion did the dancers express?
• When did they dance together?
• Was there a story? Tell me about the beginning, middle, or end.

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Tapping into Local Performing Arts Resources

For some early childhood programs, a trip to a theater, dance, or musical performance may not be possible. But that doesn’t mean that the children need to miss out on performing arts experiences. Here are some ideas for locating local performing arts groups and resources in your area.

Invite a high school ensemble band to your program. The band can perform a short piece and introduce the different instruments and their families (woodwinds, brass, and percussion). Ask the band director to allow time for a show-and-share in which children can hold the different types of instruments and explore how they work.

Ask a local dance teacher or dance troupe to perform for your program. Invite them to include children in a brief introduction to their style of dance (for example, ballet, jazz, tap, hip-hop, or Latin ballroom).

Invite the high school drama club to visit and perform a scene appropriate for young children. Or go on a field trip during which the drama students give a behind-the-scenes look at costumes and the stage.

Identify family members in your program who play a musical instrument, sing, or have a background in theater, dance, or music. Invite them to visit the children to share information and to demonstrate their particular skill.

Explore community area resources. The local arts council, community museum, local college, or small performance companies may be able to point you to performing arts resources in your area.

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Tips for Taking Young Children to a Performance

Many dance, music, and theater companies offer shows specifically geared to young children and their families or to elementary school classes. These performances offer a wonderful introduction to the performing arts. The following tips will help you prepare children for the show and help them enjoy the experience.

Prior to your visit

Call the theater in advance.
- Ask what age children should attend the performance.
- Make sure the performance is an appropriate length for the age group you teach.
- Make special arrangements for a group of children, and inquire about the ideal adult-to-child ratio for the group.

Preview the program. Whether it’s a play, a ballet, or a symphony, discuss with the children what they will be seeing and hearing during the performance. You can talk about characters, give an overview of the story, listen to other music in the same style or from the same composer, or study the biography of the playwright. If the performance is based on a story, read it to the group in advance.

Discuss audience manners. This is a good time to remind children how to behave among large groups, out in public, and during quiet times. Explain when applause is appropriate and how to be courteous to other people attending the performance.

On the day of the visit

Arrive early. Concert venues can be fascinating places, so allow children time to explore the setting. At the symphony, take them to the edge of the stage; at the ballet, check out the orchestra pit. An early arrival also leaves plenty of time to use the restroom and find the right seats.

Recognize that it is okay to leave early. Performances for very young children may last half an hour, but sometimes even that may be too long. Understand the attention limits of the children in your group. One adult can take out the children who may have reached their limits and play a game or read a story in the lobby or outdoors.

After the performance

Take time to talk about what you just saw. Review general impressions and what the children liked best or least. Follow up by reading a related book or planning an art, music, or dance project. Provide dress-up clothes, props, and other materials so children can reenact the performance.

—Meghan Dombrink-Green, Senior Editorial Associate, Young Children