

# Inventing Music Play Centers

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Illustrations on pages 2–4 by Natalie Klein Cavanagh. Photos © Ellen B. Senisi.

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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

Isenberg & Jalongo 1993, 109.

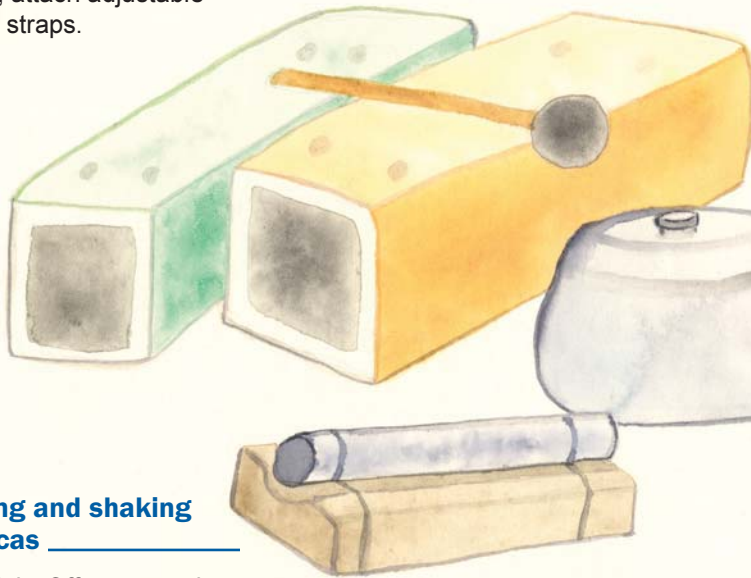


When considering the following music play center ideas, keep in mind the aims and objectives mentioned above, as well as the self-directed nature of play and the wide range of ways that teachers may support young children's play.

## 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.

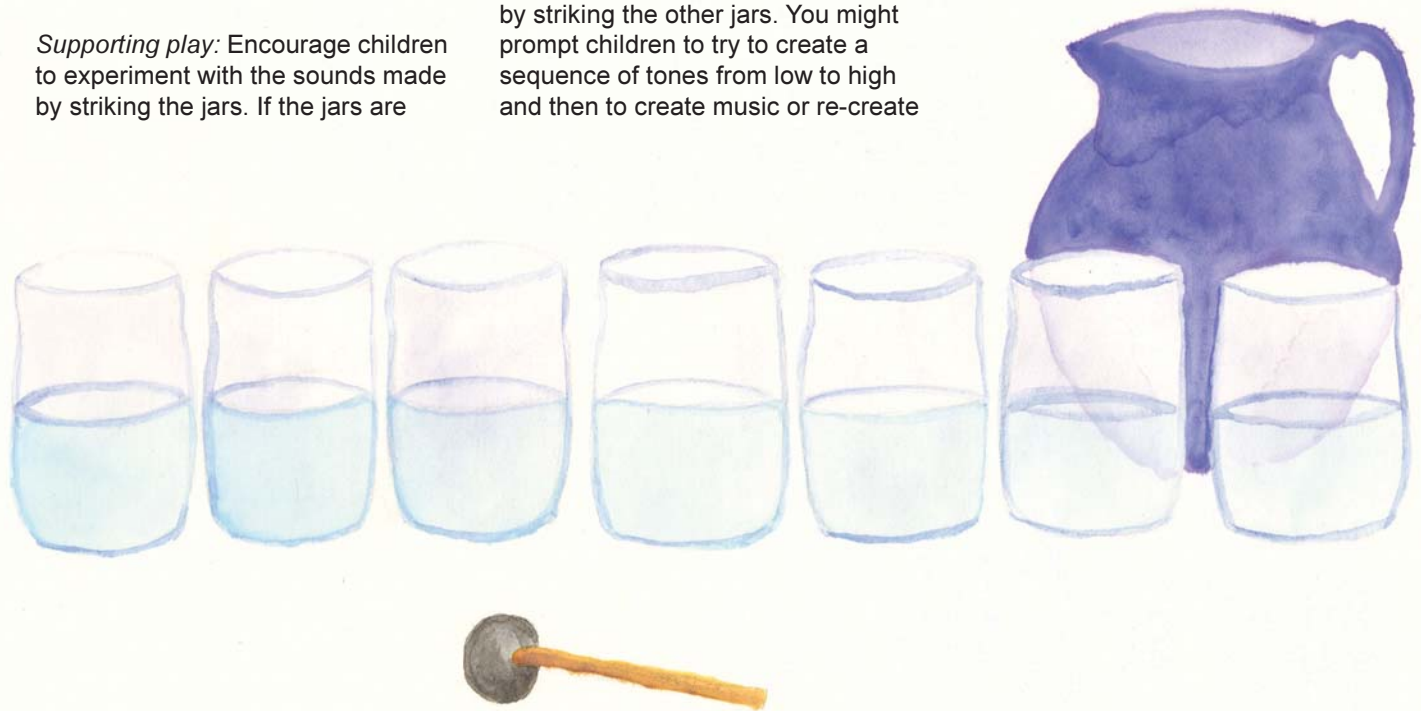
## Musical jars

**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.

## 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.



## 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.

## 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.

**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.

## Checklist for Creating a Music Play Center

### 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?

### 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)?



(cont'd on p. 6)

### 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.

## References

- Diagram Group. 1997. *Musical instruments of the world: An illustrated encyclopedia*. New York: Sterling.
- Isenberg, J.P., & M.R. Jalongo. 1993. *Creative expression and play in the early childhood curriculum*. New York: Macmillan.
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