



Make a Little Music

“Oh, we don’t have time for music in the classroom anymore,” a preschool teacher tells me. “We’re too busy preparing the children for kindergarten.”

“We can’t play music and sing in the classroom anymore,” a kindergarten teacher reports. “Our district learning standards no longer allow it.”

WHY SHOULD WE CARE that such statements are being made more often these days? Why does music matter?

In addition to the fact that young children truly enjoy music, the reasons children should have many and varied musical experiences are numerous. Among them is the belief that when music is part of their lives, children have a greater motivation to communicate with the world. Perhaps music provides their first exposure to the existence and richness of their own culture as well as the heritage and culture of other peoples and regions of the world. Music is a non-verbal form of communication and can bridge the cultural divides between people of different backgrounds.

Music is vital to the development of language and listening skills (Miché 2002). Both music and language arts consist of symbols and ideas; when the two content areas are used in combination, abstract concepts become more concrete. For example, the word *slow* has only so much meaning to a child when he reads or spells it. When he hears slow music, however, the meaning of the word expands. And when he moves as accompaniment to the music he’s hearing, he fully com-

prehends the word (Pica 2007). Music activities can improve attention span and memory and increase vocabulary (Bayless & Ramsey 2004). According to Isenberg and Jalongo (2000),

The child who learns to sing “This Old Man,” for instance, has learned to focus on a task, sequence material, and link words . . . with actions. Musical experiences, such as creating a tune at a keyboard, can develop all the higher-level thinking skills of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Shaw (2003) reports that children in music training score significantly higher in spatial-temporal reasoning, which is the kind of reasoning used in higher levels of science and math. Moreover, evidence indicates that music activities engage both the left and right hemispheres of the brain. In fact, studying music involves more right- and left-brain functions than any other activity measured (Habermeyer 1999).

All of this information points to the conclusion that music can help chil-

dren meet early learning standards, including those in literacy and mathematics. But perhaps the most important role of music in education is what it offers children *aesthetically*—that is, the development of an appreciation for beauty. If we can help children develop their aesthetic sense and thereby significantly enrich their lives, isn’t that reason enough to include music in the early childhood curriculum?

Joanne Greata writes,

When studies show that music does enhance children’s ability to learn, it is tempting for music educators to use this information to boost their programs. However, others warn that we should not lose sight of the fact that music should not be taught just for its ability to enhance other subjects—in other words, as a means to an end. Rather, it should be taught for its own worth. If we want to educate the whole child, the arts, including music, must be part of her education. Although there is evidence that music can affect cognitive development, music is worth teaching and learning for its own sake. If other benefits are realized from our musical experiences, that’s wonderful. (2006, 29)

TO DO MORE

It is impossible to think of music and movement as completely separate entities. For young children, experiencing music is not limited simply to the auditory sense (Haines & Gerber 1999; Isenberg & Jalongo 2000; Bayless & Ramsey 2004), as evidenced even by infants’ whole-body response to music. This means that movement, another topic too often eliminated from the curriculum, also must be a part of a child’s education.

When children tiptoe to soft music, stamp their feet to loud music, move in slow motion to Bach’s “Air on the G String” and then rapidly to Rimsky-Korsakov’s “Flight of the Bumblebee,” sway to a 3/4

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meter and then skip to a piece in 6/8, they are experiencing music on many levels. Each child is not only listening but also using body, mind, and spirit to express and create. Because a child is using a multimodal approach, what she or he learns will make a lasting impression. And what the child learns is considerable.

A simple place to start is with a game like Statues. Asking children to move in the way the music makes them feel is bound to be an intimidating request for many. But making a game out of putting movement to music can free children of inhibitions. Statues is a great game for this purpose. It develops listening skills, helps children differentiate between sound and silence, and offers practice with starting and stopping (self-regulation).

Instruct the children to move in any way they like while the music is playing. When the music stops (as you press the pause button), they must freeze like statues and stay that way until the music begins again. To take children by surprise and to inspire a variety of responses, vary the time you allow them to move before pausing the music. To expose children to a variety of musical styles and rhythms, use music with a different feel—a march, a waltz, rock and roll—each time they play the game.

If your school or program discourages or disallows music and movement, turn to the research to show school officials that music and movement enhance children's learning. Or use short breaks throughout the day to incorporate music and movement, emphasizing proven research on the value of taking breaks to stimulate children's learning.

TO LEARN MORE

Any of this article's references will add to your knowledge of music in early childhood. Also excellent are *Learning through Play: Music and Movement*, by Ellen Booth Church (Scholastic, 1998), and from NAEYC, the DVD *Music Play: Bah Bah Bebop, Beethoven* (South Carolina Educational Television, 1999).

To learn more about the role of the body in learning, read Carla Hannaford's *Smart Moves: Why Learning Is Not All in Your Head* (Great River Books, 2005) and just about anything written by Eric Jensen! Of particular significance are

Music with the Brain in Mind (The Brain Store, 2000) and *Learning with the Body in Mind: The Scientific Basis for Energizers, Movement, Play, Games, and Physical Education* (Corwin Press, 2000).

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