I’m clapping to the beat as we begin music time. Soon Nyra, Mason, and Aditya are clapping, too. Sophia pats the floor to the beat. While Sophia responds to the music differently from the other children, she too is engaged, involved, and focused. And she isn’t alone—Jezarra is bouncing her elbows up and down, Carson is singing along, and several other children are listening and observing.

Young children benefit from music education in many ways, but it’s easy to get discouraged when you’re confronted with so many different responses. Although each child learns in her own way and at her own pace, music activities help all preschoolers learn skills across many domains.

Some ways to include music in a preschool curriculum are singing, dancing, and playing rhythm instruments.
Sing, sing, sing!

Singing encourages oral language skills, physical development, and an understanding of concepts such as sequence and patterning. Here are some ways to incorporate singing into everyday routines:

- Sing to children throughout the day. For example, sing while you are tying shoes, zipping up jackets, and applying sunscreen. Teachers can make up songs that include children’s names. For example, Kelsey’s putting her jacket on, her jacket on, her jacket on, to the tune of “Here We Go ’Round the Mulberry Bush.” Young children are magnetized by the sound of a singing voice. It also helps them focus and absorb the language.

- Sing classics every day. For preschoolers, “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” “The Itsy-Bitsy Spider,” and “Old MacDonald” never get old.

- Sing when reading aloud stories. Phrases such as uh-oh, ding-dong, and meow lend themselves to two-note mini-songs. Children can wait for their cue to sing and join in. Singing engages and involves children in the story.

Shake, rattle, and roll!

Preschoolers enjoy playing simple rhythm instruments such as shakers and bells. While some children may be shy about singing or dancing in a group, few can resist playing with a colorful object that makes noise. Playing rhythm instruments strengthens eye–hand coordination and body awareness as children play high and low, slow and fast, and loudly and softly.

- Invite preschoolers to play shakers and bell bracelets while listening to lively music with a steady beat. Encourage children to play the instruments in different ways. For example, children can slide shakers on the floor, make them jump when held upright, or stir them like a spoon.

- Create new lyrics to familiar songs. Using the instrument, try The shakers on the bus go shake, shake, shake instead of “The Wheels on the Bus,” or I can jingle, I can jingle, I can jingle on my arm/leg/foot to the tune of “Clementine.”

- Make nontraditional instruments. Coffee-can drums are a favorite. Hit lightweight, easy-to-hold Styrofoam egg cartons on the floor, knees, or stomach for a satisfying thunk sound. Create shakers by filling empty and clean plastic honey jars half full with buttons, beads, aquarium gravel, or other small colorful items. Be sure to seal the top securely. Check all homemade items for cleanliness and safety before young children play with them, and always supervise their use.

- Keep a box full of musical instruments—like maracas, tambourines, and drums—outside so that children can choose to dance and make music while on the playground.
Get Moving!

When teachers and children move to music together, it is a unique social and bonding experience. Some preschoolers jump right in, while others wait and observe. Nevertheless, most children enjoy moving to the beat. Moving to music develops children’s coordination, flexibility, self-expression, physical fitness, and body awareness. Teachers can provide many different opportunities for preschoolers to dance throughout the day.

• Choose songs that mention only one specific movement in each verse, such as clapping hands or stomping feet. Songs with complicated directions may confuse or frustrate preschoolers.

• Keep it simple and casual. Movement activities do not have to be planned. Teachers can put on lively music and bounce around. Occasionally suggest movements, saying, Let’s pat our legs or Can you wave your hands in the air?

• Join in with energy and a smile. Watch how a child moves, and then copy his movements. Young children find it fun and empowering when they see teachers follow their lead.

• Include music from children’s cultures and from countries around the world. Preschoolers respond enthusiastically to joyous, rhythmic music. Music from other cultures can inspire children to find new ways to move and react to the new sounds they hear.

• Go with the flow. I once planned an activity to play shakers while listening to some very rhythmic Indian music. To my surprise and delight, when the music started, the children immediately picked up their shakers and danced around the room exuberantly. Of course, I joined in. Preschoolers have much to teach us about spontaneity and living fully in the moment.

Conclusion

Teachers can incorporate music into the day to foster preschoolers’ physical, cognitive, and social development. When music is a priority, children come together for smiles, fun, and creativity.

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