
FEATURE

Making music in early childhood classrooms

Note: This is the second in a two-part article. In the spring issue, we described making rhythm instruments and exploring their sounds.



Making and playing rhythm instruments is a time-honored early education practice and a perfect way to introduce young children to music. Singing, listening, and moving to a beat enrich children’s auditory, visual, tactile, and kinesthetic skills. These rich and varied music experiences build the brain strength that ongoing cognitive abilities demand.

Music experiences help preschoolers strengthen their social skills. They learn to share instruments, take turns, focus attention, and negotiate plans, for example. Emotional satisfaction is also steeped in musical experiences. Think about the emotional range you experience in a morning radio-music show—exhilaration, soulful sadness, joy, peace, and uplifting expectation are all familiar. Children respond to sound similarly—even without lyrics.

Marching, dancing, or even simple swaying help develop stamina, balance, and muscle strength. Further, agility—the ability to stop and start quickly—

is important to body control and self-regulation. Even the simple arm, hand, and finger movements involved in finger snapping, clapping, and arm swinging support both muscle and cardiovascular health.

Get started

Introduce music concepts slowly balancing the physical—how the body moves—with the science of sound—how we hear and respond.

Notice how much children enjoy moving to a beat, using their voices as instruments, and making sounds with their hands and feet—all opposite to what happens when there is a constant drone of background sound with no one paying attention. Keep it active—music is a tool for self-discovery; sounds impact behaviors, and behaviors are impacted by different sounds.

Some basic concepts and definitions may help you explain music



PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

and rhythm activities more effectively. First, the difference between music and noise: *Music* is created by organized sounds while *noise* is disorganized or arbitrary sound. Building the organization of musical sound depends on the following:

- rhythm—a pattern of sound (long or short, heavy or light) that includes the beat (pulse) and tempo (fastness and slowness),
- melody—the flow of tones in a particular rhythm,
- tempo—the speed of the music, and
- timbre (pronounced *tambur*)—the unique qualities of a sound produced by voices or instruments. For example, a flute and a trombone may play the same melody but with vastly different sounds.

If you're new to music with young children, take a deep breath and be ready for fun. Choose a simple and familiar tune like "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" or "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." Sing it with the children once and then change it—the rhythm, tempo, melody, or timbre. Sing in a high, falsetto voice; switch the melody to that of a different familiar song; sing it s-l-o-w-l-y, or fast; or sing it softly like a lullaby.

Beyond the voice, continue to explore music concepts with the body. Use a stethoscope from the dramatic-play prop box to listen and to feel the children's heartbeats. Compare the different timbres when you clap hands with open palms and cupped palms. Explore rhythm and tempo with and without recorded music. Challenge children to use their fingers, nails, and

knuckles to make sounds.

As you plan activities with rhythm instruments, assume your role as orchestra conductor: You know how all the instruments work and how they sound. Guide the children in their disciplined use to avoid accidents. One tip: Have children leave instruments on the floor or a tabletop until you give the signal to pick up the instruments. In an orchestra this is often just the conductor's nod, sometimes a low swoop of the arms. Eyes to the conductor; instruments are quiet. At the end of the piece, the conductor uses gesture to let the orchestra members know to put down their instruments. Use words like, "Pick up your instruments" and "Put down," or consistent gestures, to guide the children.

Using rhythm instruments

Help build musical skills with activities throughout the day—including on the playground. Elementary school teachers often use a one-clap, two-clap, three-clap, initiate-and-response system to get children's attention. The teacher claps once and children nearest clap in response; teacher claps twice, and more children respond; teacher claps three times, and the whole group responds with quiet focus.

Similar call-and-response activities can introduce beat and tempo with or without rhythm instruments.

Play an instrumental recording of music with a steady beat like John Philip Sousa's "Washington Post March" or Leroy Anderson's "Syncopated Clock." (Remember to check your local library and

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



YouTube for traditional and world music recordings.) Keep the recording volume at a moderate level (so children can hear your voice above the music) and start clapping. Model by clapping on the beat and encouraging the children to join you. Start with a traditional clap (hands vertical). Build the activity by varying how you clap—with hands overhead, with arms stretched out in front or behind your back, or with your hands held horizontally.

Similarly, use nursery rhymes to reinforce beat, first with claps and then with whole body movement like marching. “The Grand Old Duke of York” and “Hickory Dickory Dock” each has strong rhymes that make finding the beat easy. Encourage children to experiment with other ways of signifying the beat—patting thighs,

snapping fingers, or stomping feet, for example.

Reinforce the concept of *beat* with charted symbols. Draw beat patterns on large sheets of paper, for example */// // /// //* or *//// // //// /*. Clap to the beats.

Introduce rhythm instruments and devise classroom activities to help children coordinate movement, learn to identify musical beat, and gain skill in playing an instrument to make or punctuate music. The following activities elaborate on clapping experiences and can be used with or without musical accompaniment.

Shakers

Shakers—from maracas to *caxixi* (pronounced ke-she-she) and tambourines—are simple tools for music exploration. Tapping and shaking build muscle strength

and agility—sometimes with one hand and sometimes with two. Encourage the children to discover *soft* and *loud* melodies and *fast*, *slow*, and *steady* rhythms.

It’s wise to introduce (and demonstrate) shakers before sharing them in an activity. Bring out one of your instruments and show how to shake it gently. Move around the room so children can follow the sound. Demonstrate the short movement of the wrist, and ask the children to mimic your movement—the action is in the wrist, not the whole arm.

Invite children to choose and hold one shaker—maracas, *caxixi*, or tambourine. Work with the children to demonstrate all the ways they can shake: tapping into the palm of the other hand, shaking high in the air or behind the back, or shaking in and out (close to the body and out, to the beat).

Pulse shakers to a Sousa marching beat in a classroom parade. Gather the children and show how to shake with a firm, precise beat—as though the shaker is marching. March in toward the middle of a circle and back out again; march the shaker up one side of the body and down the other; march the shaker across the midline of the body stretching to the left and right; march high and low.

Play a modified game of Red Light Green Light to build auditory agility. When you say, “green light,” children move through the space keeping shakers as quiet as possible. When you say, “red light,” children shake vigorously.

Drums

Introduce drums with examples from your handmade or purchased children’s toys and several

PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ



that you borrow from musicians. Demonstrate the range of sounds each produces according to how you use your hands, fingers, fists, or drumsticks.

Invite children to choose a drum for an animal-step activity. Challenge children to use their hands (not drumsticks) to imitate the sounds elephants, horses, mice, bears, snakes, and birds might make walking across the drum head.

Encourage children to repeat the patterns you tap out on your drum. Encourage them to attend to pauses in the music as well as the actual sound—essential in reading and playing music. For example, *ta ta ta* or *ta ti-ti ta*. In the example, the *ti* sound is half as long as the *ta* sound, two *ti* taps equal one *ta* tap. Encourage children to repeat your pattern of long and short sounds. Gradually make the patterns longer and more complex.

Sticks

Rhythm sticks are sturdy and, when tapped, make a clear, sharp sound—perfect for keeping the beat. Show the children how to hold the sticks: Sit on the floor cross-legged and rest your forearms near the knees, hands a few inches from the floor. Tap the sticks gently, using the wrist rather than the whole arm. Share pairs of sticks with the children and encourage them to follow your movements: tapping the sticks together, tapping the floor (alternating left and right sticks), and scrape the sticks across one another. Invite children to lead the group or let them work with a partner to create patterns, such as tap the floor with one stick, tap

the sticks against each other, and tap the floor with both sticks.

Use rhythm sticks to reinforce melody and beat. Working with a small group, tap out the lyrics to a familiar song like “Happy Birthday” or “Itsy Bitsy Spider,” without words. Encourage children to listen (no singing) and to tap along with you when they recognize the tune.

Lead a call-and-response game with sand block clappers. Build a series of patterns that combine clapping and swishing (rubbing the blocks together) sounds. For example, *clap clap, swish swish, clap clap*. Repeat each pattern until all the children understand that the activity requires listening and copying—coordination and focus. Add patterns to keep children engaged and then let them create patterns, taking turns with partners.

Introduce experienced children to musical notation by charting your patterns with symbols. For example, $> <$ means clap and $] [$ means swish. Your notation pattern might look like this:

$> < / > < /] [/] [/] [$
Clap, clap, swish, swish, swish

Bells

Ankle and wrist bells are durable reminders of how much children move. Whether bells are attached to the body or held from a strap, introduce bells deliberately. Show how they can jingle or ring according to how they are held and manipulated. Play a section of Leroy Anderson’s “Sleigh Ride” to give children an idea of how bells are used in orchestral work. Challenge them to signal (finger on the forehead) when



PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

they identify a bell sound.

Help older children distinguish left and right in a game of Hokey Pokey with bells. Ask children to put bells on either the left ankle or left wrist. Let the children know that sometimes the action will be quiet and sometimes jingle-bell noisy—especially as you “put your left hand in and shake it all about.”

Similarly, reinvent the traditional Simon Says with ankle and wrist bells. Instruct children to attach a set of bells to one extremity—right or left arm or leg. Give Simon Says directions that include hopping on a left foot, shaking a right hand, stamping both feet, tapping toes, and running in place. Don’t forget to say, “Simon Says.”

Use large jingle bells in an obstacle course: The object is to make it through the course without sounding the bell. Tie bells to 6-inch lengths of string and affix to outdoor equipment like Hula Hoops, balance beams, or cardboard-box tunnels. Expect giggles and numerous requests to start over as children work to make it through the course without a bell ringing.

Horns

Horns and other wind instruments are the most challenging for children to master and the most difficult to keep clean. If your program can afford recorders or whistles, make sure to heed sanitation practices and discourage sharing.

Build a song library of traditional train songs that invite whistle punctuation like “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad,” “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain,” “Train Is A-Comin’” and

“Moringtown Ride.” Sing often enough that the children learn when to add the whistle to the tune.

Sea chanties and work songs also invite punctuation with rhythm instruments. Make “Erie Canal,” “Blow Ye Winds,” “Blow the Man Down,” “Randy Dandy-Oh” and “Cockles and Mussels (Molly Malone)” part of your class music collection. If you don’t use horns, substitute other instruments that reinforce rhythm and beat.

Listen to Hugh Masekela’s “Grazing in the Grass.” Encourage children to hear and identify the cow bell rhythm that is prominent in the song. Invite the children to pantomime the band. Gather lines of chairs and divide the children into four groups: piano, horn, bell, and drum players. Let the children take turns standing as their sections are dominant. Appreciate that sometimes everyone will be standing and sometimes only the horn and bell sections, for example.

Take every opportunity to make music experiences meaningful to children. Music, and the instruments people make to support the human singing voice, are ageless and universal. Explore and enrich your learning community by listening to a range of music—from hip-hop and reggae to traditional work songs and orchestra pieces. You and the children in your care will find joy in listening to the music and moving to the sounds.

Children’s books about making music

Andreae, G. (1999). *Giraffes can’t dance*. New York, NY: Orchard.

Cox, J. (2003). *My family plays music*. New York, NY: Holiday House.

Crain, L. (2010). *Dancing feet*. New York, NY: Knopf.

Dole, M. L. (2003). *Drum, Chavi, drum*. San Francisco, CA: Children’s Book Press.

Garriel, B. (2012). *I know a shy fellow who swallowed a cello*. Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mills Press.

Geringer, L. (2010). *Boom boom go away*. New York, NY: Athenium.

Lithgow, J. (2013). *Never play music right next to the zoo*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Martin, B. & Archambault, J. (1988). *Barn dance*. New York, NY: Macmillan/Square Fish.

Moss, L. (1995). *Zin! zin! zin! A violin*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

Pinkney, B. (1994). *Max found two sticks*. New York, NY: Aladdin Paperbacks.

Sauer, T. (2009). *Chicken dance*. New York, NY: Sterling.

Shoulders, D. & M. (2006). *D is for drum*. Ann Arbor, MI: Sleeping Bear Press.

Willems, M. (2019). *Because*. New York, NY: Hyperion Books for Children.

Teacher resources

Connors, A. F. (2004). *101 rhythm instrument activities for young children*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Connors, A. F. (2017). *Exploring the science of sounds: 100 musical activities for young children*. Lewisville, NC: Gryphon House.

Isbell, R. (2008). *The complete learning center book*. Beltsville, MD, Gryphon House. ■