

Music and Language: The Good News

What songs do you remember from your childhood? The first songs my parents sang are still vivid memories. My father used to cross his legs, put me on the suspended foot, and bounce me while he sang, "Pony-boy, Pony-boy, won't you be my Tony boy?" My mother's favorite was "From Lucerne to Weggis Town," which she sang dramatically, rolling her hands on "Holl-di-ra-di-ah," then clapping and snapping on the parts that follow. Both of these songs have aspects that children love—perky tempos, good nonsense syllables, contrast, motions, and physical contact. But most importantly, they still carry today the richness of love and delight that I felt when my parents sang with me.

I especially loved hearing those interesting sounds in the songs—such as "holl-di-ra-di-ah" and "giddy-up"—over and over. I couldn't have guessed back then that, even as they inspired my love of music, these sounds were also important for my language development. But I know now that many language skills are supported by singing, including phonological awareness and understanding the rhythmic and tonal aspects of language.

The ability to recognize, discriminate, and manipulate the sounds in one's language is closely related to early reading ability. Part of phonological awareness is a child's ability to decipher phonemes, or single sounds that can be isolated (such as the "k," "ih," and "d" sounds in the word "kid"). One way that music helps a child decipher and express phonemes and syllables is through repetition. The neutral syllables or vocables in songs without words allow children to focus on the phoneme sounds, such as "la," "dee," "chicka," or "biddy."

The phonemes and syllables may be more available to your child when sung than when spoken, due both to repetition and the slightly slower overall tempo of singing compared to speech. Try it yourself. Sing the first two phrases of "Three Blind Mice" and time it. (You can use your smartphone.) Then say it twice and time it. Is there a difference in time? For me, singing took 4.5 seconds, while speaking took 2.3 seconds. The slower pace of song, as well as the repetition of phrases, make the sounds of language available longer, possibly allowing for more phonological decoding. In a study of phonological awareness, music perception, and early reading skills in a population of one hundred four- and five-year-olds, "music skills were found to correlate significantly with both phonological awareness and reading development" (Anvari et al. 2002)¹.

Songs also provide models of speech and, through repetition, offer ample opportunity for children to absorb the natural rhythm of language—the accents on syllables, the emphasis of certain parts of speech within a phrase, the relative duration of syllables within a word or words within a phrase. While phrases in music are generally slower than phrases in speech, in most folk and popular music, they are proportional to the natural rhythms of spoken language.

Music assists us in learning to hear pitch differences, which is important in language learning. For example, French and Chinese are spoken at a higher pitch with more pitch variation; English and Russian are spoken at a lower pitch. Children learn to adapt to the general pitch level of their communities in order to become part of the culture. In addition to the pitch fluctuations of individual words, questions and exclamations have culturally



accepted pitch contours. By singing songs in a variety of tonalities (such as major, minor, and Mixolydian) and playing instruments with a rich variety of sounds, you give your child practice in hearing, deciphering, encoding, and eventually expressing a variety of tonal aspects of both music and language.

Singing to and with your child will help his language development at any age. Babies' reception is open and available to any language in the world, to any phoneme, syllable, melody, or vocable. Toddlers use language and music to express



their newfound being. For three- and four-year-olds, more music and more language means more power and more independence, and possibly more attention. The richness of what your child hears will, in part, determine the richness of his expressive language. The greater the variety of story and song, the better. The more repetition, the better. The good news is that music activity develops neural capacities, which then supports language learning and other learning as well. How fabulous to have the pleasure of music teach us so much.

Your child receives multiple benefits when you make music and may look back affectionately in later years at the Music Together songs you sing or play together now. Perhaps one

day she will be bouncing her own child on her knee, singing the songs she first learned with you. How wonderful that singing and moving provide a play medium for families, as well as an opportunity to delight in music and language.

—Lyn Ransom, D.M.A., Certified Music Together Teacher Trainer and Coauthor, *Music Together®* Preschool

¹ Sima H. Anvari, Laurel J. Trainor, Jennifer Woodside, and Betty Ann Levy. 2002. "Relations Among Musical Skills, Phonological Processing, and Early Reading Ability in Preschool Children," *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology* 83: 111–130.

For two good introductory articles on music and the brain, please see:

- Laurel J. Trainor, "The Neural Roots of Music," *Nature*, May 29, 2008, 598–599.
- Sharon Begley, "Your Child's Brain," *Newsweek*, February 18, 1996, 55–61.



About Music Together®

Celebrating its 25th Anniversary this academic year (2012-2013), Music Together® is an internationally recognized early childhood music and movement program for children birth through grade two and the adults who love them. The Music Together curriculum, coauthored in 1987 by Kenneth K. Guilmartin (Founder/Director) and Rowan University Professor of Music Education Dr. Lili M. Levinowitz (Director of Research), is based on the recognition that all children are musical. All children can learn to sing in tune, keep a beat, and participate with confidence in the music of their culture, provided that their early environment supports such learning.

Music Together offers programs for families, schools, at-risk populations, and children with special needs in over 2000 communities in 40 countries around the world. The company is passionately committed to bonding children and their caregivers through music and helping people discover the joy and critical educational value of early music experiences.

More at www.musictogether.com and www.facebook.com/MusicTogether.