

# **Music matters in early years' settings**

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## **Introduction**

The potential of music in early years' settings is often unrecognised or at least undervalued and the contrasting attitudes of staff towards mark-making and music-making are striking. Most adults are relaxed about offering mark-making activities such as drawing and there is widespread appreciation of young children's self-initiated representations. But spontaneous musical behaviours in play situations often go unrecognised. These musical explorations and fascinations are rarely provided for and their possibilities developed. Indeed organising creative activities involving music often seems to present challenges.

## **The power of music**

Colwyn Trevarthen, one of UK's foremost researchers of young children's innate musicality writes:

' ... I have seen what power music has in communication with infants. Mothers' songs, action games and dances, and instrumental and recorded music of more popular 'folk' kinds, appeal to young infants many months before words have any sense, pleasing them, animating them and calming them to peaceful sleep. Infants also participate musically with skill. They hear music and they join in. We are certainly born musical. This musicality is an expression of the moods and self-regulations that infants and their companions, old and young, can share. (Trevarthen in Pavlecevic 1997)

Music is basic to humans – its history goes back about 200,000 years ago.

Archaeologists suggest that musical communication actually preceded articulate human speech (Mithen 2005). Certainly by the Neolithic period, 30,000, simple musical instruments such as pipes, are tangible evidence of the early social practice of music. Anthropologists now generally agree that '[music] evolved as a prime factor of our social communication, our learning and the creation of cultural meaning' (Panksepp and Trevarthen in Malloch and Trevarthen 2009, 106).

In our own times we appreciate that music is universal and that every community has evolved musical traditions. We are ourselves familiar with, and enjoy many types of music – rock and pop, folk and jazz, and classical music. Cross-cultural research by Bjørkvald (1989) provides intriguing glimpses into many musical traditions. For example, in Swahili one word -

'ngomo' - is used to cover three aspects of music, that is, song, dance and play. Observations of any young children will reveal these same activities coming together – movement, dance, song, and drama – in their play. Rarely do they use just one of these modes. Indeed music-making is most successful when children have flexible integrated creative experiences (Lonie 2010).

Writing from the perspective of a doctor, Oliver Sachs explains how our brains have musical processes embedded in them and the therapeutic role of music in recovery from medical problems such as strokes and Parkinson's Disease (Sachs 2007). Music therapy is indeed a very ancient treatment, but some recent examples in Malloch and Trevarthen (2009), offer insights into contemporary therapeutic musical programmes such as those for young people shattered by war experiences in Bosnia or in violent townships of South Africa, as well as for children in our own country with autism or who are victims of sexual abuse.

Neuroscience and scanning techniques are also adding to our understanding. We are familiar with the enormous activity in the brain in the early years as the neurons make their connections and the innate capacities of newborns. Nevertheless, the role and potential of music tends to be overlooked – even, for example, in the valuable work of Gopnik and colleagues in the USA (Gopnik *et al.* 1999; Gopnik 2009).

We now know about biological development before birth. The foetus in the womb, from at least 22 weeks' gestation, is experiencing music and other sounds. At this early stage the auditory system is fully functioning and the brain is already processing sound. Amongst the body sounds (the mother's heartbeat and digestive system) her voice and sounds in the outside world are all influencing the unborn baby's brain. Musical sounds seem to have particular significance.

In an Italian research project, pregnant mothers and their partners regularly sang and played music to their unborn child. The parents were ready and prepared so that very soon after the birth, parents sang or played the familiar music and videoed the newborn's response. Every baby reacted to the sound – some stayed still and opened their eyes wide, others relaxed and half closed their eyes, some turned their heads towards the music source (Rhodari 2008). The project continued for several years and confirmed the power of music, especially the mother's singing, to calm, to cheer and to assist falling asleep.

## **Communicative musicality**

In the UK since the 1970s, we have learned much about the remarkable communicative capacities of babies. For example, Colwyn Trevarthen (Edinburgh University) has video-taped mothers and babies engaged in the simple interactions of talking and singing together. Analysing these recordings he and his colleagues discovered that right from birth babies were far from being passive agents. The babies themselves were often instigators of playful encounters; they actively sought out new experiences; they were essentially social and sociable.

Malloch and Trevarthen's large edited collection of international research papers *Communicative Musicality* (2009), presents important and fascinating evidence from neuroscientists, biologists, anthropologists, music therapists and others. Above all the fundamental musicality of babies in their early relationships is made plain. The qualities of the mother's speaking voice to her baby (infant-directed speech) are musical, with noticeable rhythms and melodious patterns. But more than that, baby's responses mirror their mother's – their voices rising and falling. Trevarthen and other researchers have formulated the concept of 'communicative musicality'. Humans use musical forms in their speech – noticeable changes in pitch, strong rhythms, variety in volumes and changes in speed – to attract and keep the baby engaged. The baby imitates these musical ideas, with adult and child seeming like dance partners. It is now thought that this very early musical communication has been valuable in human evolution, because it strengthens bonds between parent (or carers) and child.

## **Music in early years' settings**

Given these strong reasons in support of music why does it lag behind other early years' creative expression? The following reasons are suggested from observations:

- A lack of awareness, knowledge and appreciation of children's spontaneous musical behaviours in their everyday play;
- Little awareness of the role of music in the development of relationships and the pedagogical implications of this;
- Limited ideas about how to foster children's innate musicality;
- Lack of confidence and fear of exposure of perceived lack of musicianship;
- A tendency to over-emphasise 'accurate' performance;
- A belief that music depends on genetic endowment;
- Worry about the noise that musical activities might make.

Group singing is quite common and often enjoyable, but it does not offer the communicative possibilities of one-to-one musical engagement; there is no place for children's own musical enquiries and experiments. Many children miss out on creative musical opportunities that have potential for their development and well-being when adults are unaware of children's spontaneous songs, rhythmic expressions and sound investigations.

Music should respond to the children's play and stage of development. Often music appropriate to babies and toddlers is not sufficiently distinguished from that for older preschool children. Young (2003) covers both these age phases and includes parental engagement. A comprehensive overview of early years practice in Lonie's research report from Youth Music emphasises valuing music for its own sake rather than for claims such as improving reading abilities at this stage (Lonie 2010).

It would seem that the importance of communicative musicality in group settings is not yet properly appreciated. Essentially this involves an adults' capacity to observe, to tune in, to reflect, to respond playfully and to 'partner' the child. In the commentary of a recently published DVD – *The Drama of Sound* – Trevarthen says 'All will go well if one acts playfully with a playful creature ...' This early years research by Newcastle-based Sightlines Initiative, benefiting from years with Trevarthen as their mentor, has led to an inspiring professional development package (2011).

Several other notable projects similarly based on a child-focussed, creative and reflective approach inspired by the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia, have built a body of knowledge in recent years. From Birmingham the Moonbeams project worked with babies as well as other early years' children bringing in musicians to work collaboratively with educators. Youth Music has published a booklet drawing on this work – *Tuning in to Children* (Evans 2011). In the South West, another wide-ranging, long-term arts education project, *5x5x5=creativity* with a similar and clearly presented philosophy, encourages all forms of expressive language such as, music, drama, drawing, dance, movement and imaginative play, that is the 'hundred languages of children' (Bancroft, et al 2008). Musicians and artists collaborate with education settings and cultural centres underpinned by continuing professional development.

### Questions

1. How might information from neuroscience and biology relating to musicality be disseminated to early years' staff?
2. What forms of professional development can foster communicative musicality in early years' settings?

### 3. How can collaboration between professional musicians and educators work most productively?

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#### Websites

- [www.5x5x5creativity.org.uk](http://www.5x5x5creativity.org.uk)  
[www.sightlines-initiative.com](http://www.sightlines-initiative.com)