MUSIC TOGETHER®

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DOES PLAY MAKE YOU SMARTER?

Our last newsletter addressed the currently popular query, "Does music make you smarter?" Whatever your point of view on that issue, there is no doubt that children use the process of play to enhance intelligence. From the rattle that's gripped and shaken, to the castles fashioned from cardboard boxes — chances are, if you have a child, that child right now is playing. Take any chore you want her to do, like putting away toys or helping you sort laundry, and that activity will inevitably be transformed by her innate need to play. For children, playing is as irresistible as sleeping or eating — and just as essential for cognitive skills and social survival.

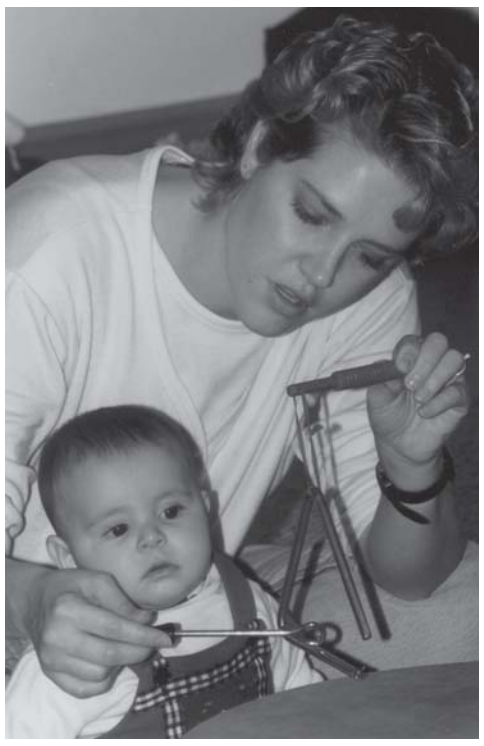
As psychologists Ruth E. Hartley and Robert M. Goldenson write, "Play is the way the child learns what no one can teach him." And that includes music. Playfulness is the core of the Music Together approach because you can't "teach" music to very young children. Just as they learn to talk and walk by playing with sound and movement, so children discover and develop musical skills by playing with melody and rhythm.

How children play with music depends upon their age and developmental stage and may not be readily apparent. Infants and toddlers just babble sounds — which may or may not match the key pitches of the song being sung. A two-year-old may refuse to participate in class by shaking her head to the song's beat, while the three- or four-year-old who won't stop jogging around the classroom may be running in step with subdivisions of the beat.

What is true for children of all ages is that playfulness is a critical component of their development. Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget was the first to systematically study how children acquire understanding, and he mapped out developmental stages and corresponding modes of play. For Piaget, play is how children assimilate increasingly complex facets of reality, their way to explore and rehearse all the richness of human interaction.

While it's convenient to assume that child's play is simple, experts assure us that it is not. All of a child's faculties get engaged through play — her intellect and emotions, her sense of her physical self, her perceptions of cultural and social values, and her individual psychology. That's why a Music Together class does not require any specific level of participation: many children are held so fascinated by all the activity during class that they don't act on musical elements until they are in the car going home or are tucked into bed.

And psychologists say that child's play always presents a thriving paradox: freedom of movement and expression get tempered by an improvisational set of play "rules" that children make up or agree to. Those "rules" — as basic as agreeing to use egg shakers or pretending to ride in a car — continuously evolve, spinning off in any direction which the child wants to explore. By spontaneously inventing on an underlying "rule" or framework, children learn that they can make things happen, a critical contribution to their sense of autonomy and self-esteem. Adults may facilitate children's play, acting as guides or even participants, but they must relinquish control: children need to bang a drum or move their hands according to the beat they hear. It is only by integrating an underlying framework of "rules" with their own playful improvisations that children can unlock their creativity and advance in higher thinking. Then they can adjust their playing to the beat we hear.



PLAY IS THE WAY A CHILD LEARNS WHAT NO ONE CAN TEACH HIM.

Yet too often, improvisational play gets ignored, particularly when musical activities are presented as something to be replicated and performed. When music is "taught" to young children, parents or teachers tend to impose the kind of drill exercises and goal orientation that much older children and adults use to master skills. That fails to recognize that young children need playful inventiveness to begin to build skills they may not attempt to master until they are much older.

Consider that other great category of movement in which children get initiated: sports. Children don't really "play" t-ball; instead, they learn to wait their turn, swing a bat, and run bases according to a bewildering set of rules. When they "play" sports, they're really learning complex procedures and specific movements — an exhiliarating process for those children who, by adolescence, can connect the parts into a coherent whole. But many younger children can get frustrated by the rigors of such "play," disheartened by what feels like their own ineptness.

Most children in this situation simply opt out of sports — and sadly, the same is true of music. How many of us recall the minutes dragging during music lessons or our struggles to mimic the right moves for a school recital? That is where Music Together is different. Its goal is to generate, in each classroom and home, a very rich assortment of sound, sight, tonal, rhythmic, imaginative, and emotional experiences. The songs' structures, settings, and movements provide a set of flexible and appealing "rules" or frameworks. Many different models — teachers, parents, and caregivers — give themselves over to the unique improvisational pleasures of music-making. And children's playfulness is given free rein and encouragement to explore the endless variety of physical riffs and musical responses.

Like music, play is a shared language that can bridge generations. Yet playfulness is a gift we grown-ups seldom give ourselves. Poised at the opposite end of the developmental spectrum from our children, we can be intensely goal-oriented, limiting ourselves to only those activities we do correctly and well. That's why, for many adults, Music Together delivers this timely reminder: that the "success" of play really depends upon your degree of engagement, not the results achieved. Let the basic premise of child's play — that there is no boundary between delight and participation — be not only the key to your child's development, but to your family's musical enjoyment as well.

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MUSIC TOGETHER

NEWS AND INFORMATION

WORKSHOPS FOR TEACHERS

The workshops held at CMYC can have a profound effect. Here are some comments from our February three-day workshop:

"It was inspiring to see so many people involved in this commitment," said Claudia Tulip from Cottonwood, Arizona. A professional flutist, Claudia found that the workshop "confirmed" her hands-on experience as a professional musician.

For Belinda Atkins of Queens, New York, the workshop "was a little emotional and thrilling." Belinda is now considering continuing formal music education training. "It made me want to learn as much as possible."

What did New York jazz musician Jonathan Feig think? "It swung!" he said. "It gave me a much better focus on how to approach making and presenting music to children."

For workshop information, call Claudia Mohr at (800) 728-2692 x15, or use the panel to the left to register.

SPREADING THE WORD

Kenneth K. Guilmartin's article entitled "The Adult is the Real Student!" will be published this spring. In the next few months, Ken will conduct workshops for teachers in Chicago and Los Angeles and will present conference sessions for the California Music Teachers Association in Ontario, California, and the National Head Start Association in Minneapolis.

Lili Levinowitz, program co-author, will present sessions at the upcoming conventions for the Pennsylvania Music Education Association in Valley Forge and the Early Childhood Music and Movement Association near Boston.

Sally Woodson, director of Music Together of the Upper West Side (NY) and Lynne Ransom, CMYC director of program development, recently presented a session for the Texas Music Educators Association. Lynne will present a session at the Music Teachers National Convention in Los Angeles. We love meeting Music Together parents and teachers, so say hello if we're at a convention near you!

CHILDREN S MUSIC PLAY

Playing in class is lots of fun, but we love hearing about music-play at home.

Daniel Fleming, who is almost three, crawls under his blanket and sings with abandon! According to mom Robin Buckingham, Daniel uses his Music Together tapes as a jumping-off point for his own improvisations.

Ten-month old Grace Deaton just loves making sound effects--with "vroom!" right at the top of her list. At home, her mother Joy is playing with her own singing voice, a discovery she made at Music Together!

Two-year old Gabrielle Judge just can't stop dancing. Amazed by how much her daughter loves to move, mother Linda says Music Together has made her aware of other things her daughter can discover.

And Joshua Isaacs, also two, has some favorite "toys": his parents' native American drums. Says father Hanon, "Clearly, Joshua has discovered a very physical concept of rhythm and fun."

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Both children and adults learn from play! Top left: Belinda Atkins, a professional singer from Queens, New York, plays with another teacher at a recent workshop in Princeton. At home Belinda plays vocally with her son, creating "mini-operas." "Get up and take a shower," sings Belinda. "No, I don't want to!" he sings back. Bottom left: Jonathan Feig, a jazz musician from New York, studies the ways jazz promotes scientific learning and literacy in young children. Pictured at left, Jonathan and other workshop participants make a little "mouth music." Top right: Parents, caregivers, and children enjoy the chant "I'm Hiding." Adults and children take turns hiding under a scarf, anticipating a scary "boo!" Workshop participants observe the demonstration class with envy. Bottom right: Piper Tseng from Taiwan learned how to play musically at a recent CMYC workshop. Here she plays a tambourine and leads a movement activity.

DIRECTOR'S LETTER

Dear Parents and Caregivers,

I flew to Australia over the holidays to visit my own daughter, who's now 20 and was spending a semester in Sydney. Many Music Together principles grew out of my observations of her when she was the same age your children are now.

I also visited our farthest-flung outpost: Auckland, New Zealand, and Music Together teacher Stacey Schuck. Stacey and her husband Simon, who both teach Suzuki violin, treated me to their hospitality, as well as to some provocative discussions.

Simon mentioned how other kids called him a "poofster" because he pursued ballet and violin as a child, instead of rugby. That made me think that we often see sports and music at odds with each other, even though physical conditioning is necessary for musicians and rhythmic skills are essential in athletics. Both are needed for a healthy, balanced life. But for many of us growing up, "music" was that 40 minutes a week we spent memorizing songs we didn't like with an overworked, itinerant music teacher in grade school.

Stacey expressed concern over the lack of support for music in New Zealand, saying that too often, music education boils down to nothing more than children taking a few lessons. That struck me as the state of affairs throughout our modern media culture, where, for everyone except those children, music is almost exclusively a spectator sport.

I was reminded of a four-year old cellist I knew who, after playing his piece at a recital, was asked how he enjoyed performing for an audience. "I felt like they were alligators — and I was the food," he calmly stated, and quit playing for four years. Even more telling is the image I get of a young child preparing for such a performance, practicing at home all alone. It strikes me that, although we'd never expect a young child to be responsible for his family's level of literacy or physical fitness, we often find children carrying the tradition of a family's musical life all alone. They are the only ones who DO it — the rest of us sit and consume it. I think this becomes a burden to many, and they quit.

I asked Stacey if she was concerned about her Music Together families, and her answer was an emphatic "no!" We agreed that's because Music Together trains the entire family to value music-making. Our parent education program not only explains the social, cultural, and neurological benefits of music, it also generates and facilitates active participation by parents and caregivers. Just as most of us expect to put in time explaining math problems or playing sports with our kids, so we need to take the educational and experiential lead when it comes to music.

For those of us who teach Music Together, it's wonderful to see parents reclaim their long-lost playfulness. It's an even greater pleasure to introduce them to the joys of making music together as a family. With that kind of support and depth of experience in music as the social art it truly is, your child will be better able to sustain a lifelong interest in music study and activities.

Enjoy your spring, especially the music-making part of it.

Kenneth K. Guilmartin
Founder/Director, Center for Music and Young Children

MT/PRESCHOOL

Preschools and daycare centers have been using Music Together activities for a dozen years, yet recently interest from preschool professionals has intensified. The program appeals to early childhood educators, because the children love the music, the activities are developmentally sound, and the training program is accessible to teachers, even those with little background in music. Also, more and more of today's parents prefer a preschool that has a quality music program, especially one that can involve the whole family, as Music Together does.

Lucia Hopple teaches four- to six-year-olds in an all-day Montessori preschool in Loveland, Ohio. There she leads Music Together classes for her preschool students and integrates the music into their other subjects. She uses their favorite Music Together song "Camels" when they're talking about Egypt, for instance, providing scarves for camel trains.

The children are thriving musically, and the Music Together philosophy supports Lucia's educational goals throughout the school. "The program is essential for me to develop the kind of preschool curriculum I want — developmentally appropriate and full of musical joy."

Another Music Together teacher, Betsy Geiger, is also director of the Prospect Cooperative Nursery School in Maplewood, New Jersey. At the co-op, she teaches several classes of four-year-olds and finds that her Music Together training has given her many techniques she can put to good use. "I use fingerplays and rhythm patterns throughout the day to focus their attention," Betsy says.

And Music Together time is a school favorite. "They all want to be the leader!" Betsy laughs. "'Can You Do What I Do?' is very popular!" The school's music center is always open, and Betsy says it's not at all unusual to find a crowd of children there, happily drumming away.

RESOURCES

Child's play is serious business, particularly for developmental psychologists. Two books from the National Association for the Education of Young Children highlight different theories about play. *Play In The Lives of Children* by Cosby S. Rogers and Janet K. Sawyer provides an excellent overview of children's different developmental stages as outlined by Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. "Practice" or repetitive play governs a child's first 24 months, while children ages 2 through 7 are absorbed by "symbolic" or imaginative play. Older children ages 7 through 12 engage in games with rules. Throughout each stage, children use play to learn how to solve problems, make choices, enhance social skills, and express emotions.

Other insights are presented in *Scaffolding Children's Learning: Vygotsky and Early Childhood Education* by Laura E. Berk and Adam Winsler. Lev Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist who studied children's social development. Unlike Piaget, who felt that play was the way children assimilate information, Vygotsky believed that play was the route by which children advance themselves to higher thinking.

Vygotsky claimed that children's development depends upon cultural values and the quality of their relationships with adults and other children. Expanding his theories, other psychologists have hypothesized that emotional and cultural relationships provide the "scaffolding" children need in order to develop and learn. One critical scaffolding element is mixed-age groupings, which stimulate younger children and let older children reap important benefits of socialization and self-esteem. Now that's one theory we prove in every Music Together class!

ACTIVITIES

• ***Singing in the Shower.*** Bathrooms have great acoustics and a great feeling of privacy. Be sure to sing while you're in the shower, doing a hand wash, or bathing a child. Tap with your soap, back-scratcher, or toothbrush, or make your towel "dance" while you make up a song. "Biddy Biddy" is a great tune for a quick rub in the tub, while a lullaby is perfect for wrapping and rocking a child fresh from a bath. Remember that when children see and hear their favorite adults play with music, they want to play with music, too.

• ***Singin' in the Rain.*** Weather inspires strong feelings in people of all ages, so make up songs, chants, or instrument play-alongs about whatever is happening outdoors. Other hot topics are pets, food, and wild animals.

• ***Kitchen Band.*** Fill a lower cupboard or kitchen drawer with safe (and resonant!) kitchen equipment, such as pots, spatulas, wooden spoons, and plastic containers. Encourage your child to use these music-makers by sitting on the floor and exploring sounds with her. Try making soup while you sing "Playin' in the Kitchen!" Those carrots might just cut themselves up and dance into the pot!

• ***Doll Music.*** Barbie dolls, Little People, and Playmobile figures can certainly be used to make music. Music Together Director of Research Lili Levinowitz's son Elias used to set up his Little People "on stage" to sing Music Together songs. Now 12, Elias spontaneously begins his sports games with the National Anthem!