# Music Together as a Research-based Program

by Susan Hoffman

Music Together®, first introduced to the public in 1987, was born of love, instinct, and a lot of research. Founder and director Kenneth K. Guilmartin and his coauthor Lili Levinowitz, Ph.D., examined the field of music education and then reached beyond it into the realm of early childhood learning, because they realized that even the best song material they could discover or compose would miss the mark if not presented in ways children can receive and process meaningfully.

The fields of neuroscience, psychology, and early childhood learning all offered valuable insights into how the brain processes and organizes musical material, how children learn, and how the surrounding environment can support this learning. Guilmartin and Levinowitz distilled their findings into four basic principles, which remain the cornerstones of Music Together's philosophy today:

I. All children are musical.
II. All children can achieve basic music competence.
III. The participation and modeling of parents and caregivers, regardless of their musical ability, is essential to a child's musical growth.
IV. This growth is best achieved in a playful, non-performance-oriented learning environment which is musically rich, yet immediately accessible to the child's—and the adult's—participation.

## I. All Children are Musical

The basic tenet of the Music Together philosophy is the belief that music ability is as much a natural life skill as walking or talking. It is, in itself, a way of knowing.

Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner posits that music is one of many human potentials or "intelligences" which all individuals are capable of expressing. To be sure, people may develop these intelligences to different degrees, but they are present in each of us.

According to learning theorist Edwin Gordon, music aptitude—which is the "receptive" thinking process for music—is normally distributed in the population. That is, its occurrence in children can be depicted by the same bell curve that depicts measures of other types of intelligence, such as I.Q. scores. The majority of us, therefore, have at least "average" music aptitude, which is certainly sufficient for the "expressive" process for music—that is, for participating in the music of our culture with ease and enjoyment by singing, dancing, and/or playing instruments.

Why, then, is this not reflected in our culture? Why do so many people consider themselves "tone deaf" or unmusical? Guilmartin has theorized that participatory forms of music-making and involvement have been steadily eroding since the mid-twentieth century, due to the pervasive influence of media technology. In the past, if you wanted to enjoy some music, you most often had to make it yourself, if only by singing or whistling. Increasingly, a performance orientation has dominated our music-making to the point that there is little tolerance for musical expressions that fall between expert performances on stage and singing solo in the shower.

Our culture inadequately supports music-learning during the most critical developmental period—early childhood. Fully half of today's elementary school children cannot find their singing voices. In a study published in 1998, Levinowitz, et al., showed that in the past twenty years, the percentage of elementary school children who can sing in tune has dropped an astounding 33%. Her work also finds no improvement when comparing sixth-graders with first-graders—in other words, simply growing up isn't enough to develop a singing voice. Children are rhythmically delayed as well: movement expert Phyllis Weikart has shown that many children cannot walk to a beat or do simple movement patterns. Although music aptitude is innate, it remains true that music expression, like language, is a complex skill which is learned and which must be supported in order to flourish.

## II. All Children Can Achieve Basic Music Competence

Although music learning and language acquisition are different processes in the brain, they are analogous in many ways. From infancy, the child's brain is wired to respond to stimuli in the environment. This stimulation triggers brain activities which lay down new neural pathways and make the child responsive to even subtler forms of stimulation. It's a complex feedback loop between the growing brain and its environment.

The exact processes are still not understood, but it's clear that the child is predisposed to decode the language of his culture. No one "teaches" a child language in a formal manner: the child absorbs it through his environment and, in effect, teaches himself. This happens in a fairly predictable sequence through which language gradually evolves from the child's babble.

Therefore, given a sufficiently rich environment, basic music competence—which Music Together coauthors Guilmartin and Levinowitz define as singing in tune and moving with accurate rhythm—develops in an organic, predictable sequence. During this stage—which the coauthors call "primary music development"—the child passes from what is known as "music babble" to basic music competence. As with many neurological processes, there is a time when the brain is particularly primed for this developmental task: the critical years for developing basic music competence are from birth through age six.

John Holahan, former professor at Temple University, was able to describe some of the stages which children pass through on their way to basic music competence. These growth stages seem linked to children's responses to music stimuli in an environmental feedback loop similar to that of language acquisition. This spiral of exposure and experimentation, as Guilmartin and Levinowitz have described it, is how the child teaches himself music. The essential factor, of course, is that the child be exposed to a quality music environment in order for this learning to occur.

**III. The participation and modeling of parents and caregivers, regardless of their musical ability, is essential to a child's musical growth.**

Joseph Chilton Pearce has observed that no intelligence or ability will unfold until or unless given the appropriate model environment. Providing such a quality music environment may seem a daunting task to parents whose own childhood lacked this kind of music support. Happily, though, no special music skills are required—just the musical equivalent of the cooing and talking which unconsciously supports language development.

The effect of parents' musical interaction with their child is undeniable. A study by Brian Kelley and Linda Sutton-Smith of the University of Pennsylvania demonstrated that a child being raised in a home with musically inclined parents shows music behaviors which are considerably more developed than those of a child living with parents who have little or no interest in music.

It's important to note that the child is not learning because the parents are somehow musically "talented"—she's learning because she is musically *engaged*.

Noted early childhood educator Lillian Katz has observed that children learn skills, knowledge, and dispositions from the adults in their lives. While any adult can help a child acquire skills and knowledge, only those adults with whom the child has the closest emotional bond—parents and primary caregivers—can affect a child's disposition. A music-making parent, whether musically competent or not, will give a child the disposition to make music herself.

**IV. This growth is best achieved in a playful, non-performance-oriented learning environment which is musically rich, yet immediately accessible to the child's—and the adult's—participation.**

In the groundbreaking Pillsbury Foundation Studies, Gladys Evelyn Moorhead and Donald Pond observed children over time in a preschool setting where simple musical instruments were available at all times and the children were free to choose if, when, and how to use them. In other words, music was supported in a distinctly indirect and non-formal way.

Moorhead and Pond observed that children learn entirely differently than adults. They teach themselves through their play, which is at once fun and purposeful. In this musically supportive setting, music was spontaneously interwoven with the children's play: children sang or hummed, chanted, picked up and discarded instruments, and moved rhythmically as they went about their activities. They were instinctive music-makers, expressing tonal and rhythmic behaviors as part of their being.

It is the aim of Music Together to support, and to give parents the tools to support, this natural music ability inherent in us all. The program is designed to provide the "musical nutrients" which make up a healthy music diet and allow a child's tonal and rhythmic competence to grow. The individual components of the curriculum—including short tonal and rhythm patterns, song choices in a wide range of tonalities and meters, songs with and without words, and movement activities—are based on research done by the Music Together coauthors, Edwin Gordon, and many others in the fields of early childhood and music education.

Parents and caregivers needn't worry about how to create an adequate music environment for their children: the essential ingredients are all in the Music Together material and its presentation. The playful, non-formal classroom experience, combined with active parent and caregiver participation, provide the child with a rich, developmentally appropriate experience. The inclusion of songbooks and recordings for home use encourages parents to play musically with their children, thereby supporting the child's tendency for spontaneous music-making.

Music Together's research and development arm, the Center for Music and Young Children, stays current with the latest research in the fields of early childhood education and music education, as well as conducting its own research. CMYC operates a "lab school" serving the greater Princeton, New Jersey, area where, in a regular classroom setting, the program is continually tested through observation of children's tonal and rhythmic behaviors and their responses to specific songs, activities, and tonal ranges.

Research is also conducted into parents' and caregivers' responses to the program and how the classroom activities affect family music-making at home. Music Together works closely with its teachers around the world to continually refine the program based on the experiences reported from thousands of classes. Parents and teachers alike have witnessed the strength of the program, seeing children's music behaviors blossom and grow. Parents, too, report a greater ease and enjoyment with informal music-making which, for many, is a transformative experience reconnecting them to their own musicality.

The Music Together program is based on solid, ongoing research. The result of this, however, is not a formulaic, performance-oriented learning environment but rather a warm, inclusive, playful experience for all ages. Music Together is, indeed, the Joy of Family Music.®

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