

Music and a Child's Growth and Development

An article from NACCRRA's Parent Central Express

What do grocery stores, hotels, restaurants, places of worship, and shopping malls have in common? It's music. When you're out and about, almost wherever you go, you will hear some sort of music. It affects how you feel, helps you to relax, or makes you want to move and dance. Music is used as part of our celebrations, holidays, religious or worship experiences, as well as for pure entertainment.

Music inspires, soothes, excites, and bonds people of all ages and from all walks of life. When a baby is born, somehow we know to cradle and sing to him or simply hum a melody while rocking him to sleep. What is a natural instinct for parents when they surround their new infant with music and song is also a natural way to start building the brain's connections to growth and learning. Music affects and works on all levels of development: social, emotional, physical, and cognitive growth.

Music and Social Interaction

Play music and you'll see children respond. Children will sway, swing, move, bang out a rhythm on a table, and bob their heads. Music is an easy way for parents to relate to their children. When an infant hears you sing to them, you are connecting with them, and they are connecting to you. It doesn't matter what the song is, just sing. It is making a difference.

Music and Emotional Development

Music has the ability to comfort and soothe children. Children will often sing to themselves as a way to self-soothe. You can use music to help calm your baby, or get your toddler to relax for naptime. If your preschooler is sleepy in the morning or sad, you can sing a song or play music that is cheery and makes them want to jump around and get moving.

Music and Cognitive Development

Toddlers and preschoolers love rhymes and songs. Not only do they enjoy them, but they help children learn about numbers, letters, and sounds ("ABC song", "This Old Man"). As children's brains are developing at their fastest when they are very young, with 80 percent of brain development occurring by age 3, and 90 percent by age 5, music helps with making connections in the brain.

Although there is some controversy on exactly how much music affects children's learning abilities, it is known that music is linked to improved math, memory and reading skills. When children are creative and make up their own rhymes and songs, they are also building their knowledge of words and sounds. They are building the connections in the brain. It doesn't matter what kind of music they hear or create, all music matters.

Incorporate Music into Learning and Everyday Activities

Incorporating music into activities at home and in child care can help make learning enjoyable and therefore easier for children. Many child care programs already know that music is a great way to help children prepare for transitions from one activity to another. For example, there's the "Clean Up" song that can be sung to tell children to clean up after themselves and put their toys and belongings away. You can have a song for brushing teeth or taking a bath that children will associate with that activity. Children love routine and making songs or music part of routines makes activities and learning fun.

For older children, consider letting them learn to play a musical instrument. Playing in a band or

orchestra helps children with social and emotional development. Learning an instrument like the recorder or violin helps with hand-eye coordination. Reading music helps children think differently. Most schools have programs where children can experiment with different instruments for a low cost.

Children love to hear themselves. Record your child singing and play it back for her. Or with a group of children, record each child singing a part of a song and play it back and have the children figure out who is singing which part. This will help improve their listening skills.

Music is an important part of the human experience. It is also a very creative medium. It allows for children to be able to express themselves in their own unique ways as well as contribute to their overall development. Find ways to expand how your use of music with your children at home. There is no better way to learn and have fun at the same time.

Parent Central Express is the monthly e-newsletter of Parent Central, a program dedicated to helping parents access information on children's issues and resources on parenting. Parent Central is a program of the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA).