Making connections through music in the early years



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Introduction

Humans are instinctively musical.[1] Music has such value for humans of all ages that extracting it as the theme for this resource has been both affirming and instructive.

This resource explores some concepts that we may know intuitively but don't always pause to explore deeper. We aim to shine a light on music as a universal form of expression and explore its importance in a child's development through the early years.

This importance is evidenced by the informal ways music is used in the early years, as well as its inclusion as an Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework Early Learning Goal.

We will also explore the impact of music on the neural development of babies in the womb. We will discuss music as a way of exploring and understanding culture, as well as a communication tool that helps children connect with their caregivers and supports both parties' emotional regulation. .

Note on inclusive language

In this resource, we use the term 'mother' to describe people of all genders who have given birth. When we use 'parents', we're referring to parents, carers and guardians.



[1] Hargreaves, D. J. (1986). *The developmental psychology of music.* Cambridge University Press.

Connecting before birth

Babies can hear sounds from their external environment - including music – while in the womb. These sounds influence their auditory development.[2] In fact, babies exposed to specific music in the womb can show a preference for that music after birth – a familiarity that suggests they're forming memories.[3] This shows the profound impact music has on the developing foetus, particularly in the third trimester when hearing abilities develop.

Creating music during pregnancy, for example by playing an instrument or singing, can facilitate attachment between the mother and the foetus.[4] This shared experience of music can lay the foundations for positive parent-infant relationships. In addition to providing fun and stimulation, music can support the development of premature infants and promote interactions between the parent and baby that increase bonding and reduce stress hormones.[5]



[2] Pon, A., Wang, J., Radford, L., & Carpendale, S. (2015, May). Womba: a musical instrument for an unborn child. In *NIME* (pp. 87-90).

[3] Johansen-Berg, H. (2001). *Music to your baby's ears. Trends in cognitive sciences*, 5(9), 377.

[4] O'Reilly, G., Cheung, P. S., & McCaffrey, T. (2023). A pilot study of maternal songwriting to support bonding during pregnancy: "I could feel her rise and fall with my breath while singing". *Journal of midwifery & women's health,* 68(2), 205-209.

[5] Pino, O., Di Pietro, S., & Poli, D. (2023). Effect of musical stimulation on placental programming and neurodevelopment outcome of preterm infants: a systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health,* 20(3), 2718.

Reflections:

- Are any of the children in your setting going to become older siblings soon?
- Can you help them understand that they can communicate with their new sibling before they are born?



Connecting with caregivers

Anthropological theories suggest that the act of singing to infants may have evolved to develop the caregiver-infant bond.[6] Infant-directed singing can also improve new and expectant mothers' wellbeing[7] and support mother-infant bonding during pregnancy.[8]

Mothers experiencing postnatal depression can find it hard to interact with their baby and sing in an expressive way.[9] In these cases, treatments such as music therapy can be useful. These treatments use song to encourage positive interactions between mothers and their babies. Research in this area largely focuses on mothers – less is known about the impact of music on relationships between other carers and their infants.

Caregivers are a child's first educators in the early years. Much of their early learning happens through 'serve and return' relationships, where a caregiver responds to a child's signals. Colwyn Trevarthen refers to these interactions as 'communicative musicality'[10] and illustrates how early interactions have a rhythmic and musical nature that enable the infant to interpret social meaning. He argues that infants are able to anticipate and 'conduct' how their caregivers interact with them.



[6] Fancourt, D. and Perkins, R. (2018) The effects of mother–infant singing on emotional closeness, affect, anxiety, and stress hormones, *1*

[7] Wulff, V., Hepp, P., Wolf O.T., Fehm, T. and Schaal N.K. (2021) The influence of maternal singing on well-being, postpartum depression and bonding – a randomised, controlled trial, *501*

[8] Wulff, V., Hepp, P., Wolf, O.T., Balan, P., Hagenbeck, C., Fehm, T. and Schaal, N.K (2021), The effects of a music and singing intervention during pregnancy on maternal well-being and mother–infant bonding: a randomised, controlled study. A*rchives of gynecology and obstetrics, 303*, 69-83

[9] Sanfilippo, K. R. M., Stewart, L., & Glover, V. (2021). How music may support perinatal mental health: an overview. *Archives of women's mental health, 24*(5), 831-839.

[10] Trevarthen, C. (2017). Maternal voice and communicative musicality: Sharing the meaning of life from before birth. *Early Vocal Contact and Preterm Infant Brain Development: Bridging the Gaps Between Research and Practice*, 3-23.

All these interactions build connections in an infant's rapidly developing brain. Through natural communicative rhythms with others, babies develop shared attention and enjoyment of social interactions.

Building on this, children are introduced to early learning concepts through humming, singing, drumming, and listening to live and recorded music. These experiences enable babies to connect with their caregivers while learning numbers, new vocabulary and symbolic sounds – short, simple sounds that represent objects or actions. In addition, babies develop key listening and attention skills in these contexts – skills fundamental for formal learning as they get older.

"Going to local library sing-a-long sessions created a sense of community and developed language and story time with my daughter."

Parent

Babies enjoy familiar activities that have a predictable format, particularly those that signal the start and end of an activity. Sessions such as 'rhyme time' in libraries, family hubs and stay-and-play groups allow babies to experience social interactions alongside each other. These sessions bring together families from all backgrounds and help caregivers connect with each other, often creating a sense of community.



Reflections:

- Thinking about the nursery rhymes you sing to children, what early learning concepts are included in the songs?
- How do you use rhythm and sound to develop children's listening skills and early number concepts?
- What symbolic sounds can you think of that children are taught through songs?

Connecting with culture

Music can provide a shared experience of joy, sorrow, praise, worship and nostalgia. Listening to it can positively impact empathy and attitudes towards different cultures.[11]

"If culture is the sum of the things we do and we know and what we pass on for adoption and modification then it naturally follows that music is a part of all this."[12]



[11] Clarke, E., DeNora, T. and Vuoskoski, J. (2015), Music, empathy and cultural understanding,*15*, 61-88

[12] Garfias, R. (2004) Music: the Cultural Context. National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka. p.7

Many of us tend to listen to music that we're familiar with, which is often directed by the dominant group in society.[13] To cultivate diverse tastes, early years settings could invite families or staff to share songs from their countries of origin. Introducing traditional instruments, forms of art or dances from different cultures incorporates cultural learning in a fun and interactive way.[14] These can be introduced in a variety of settings, including stay-and-play or 'rhyme time' sessions within a community, as well as in nurseries or pre-school lessons.

The stories and fables often included in music can also be used to connect young children with historical events, transferring knowledge between generations. Popular nursery rhymes like 'London Bridge is falling down' show how history can be retold through simple songs.

As well as understanding past events, music can help to mark ceremonies and religious rituals from around the world. In Japan, for example, the annual religious festival Kagura, meaning 'music of the gods', is a ceremony marked by the performance of music.[15] Music can support babies and children to understand their own and other cultural identities, helping them connect with each other and celebrate cultural differences.[16]

Reflections:



- In your setting, what instruments are used, and which countries are they from?
- What songs do you sing with children?
- Do children learn songs in other languages, or songs that are sung in different parts of the world?

[13] Louis, S., & Betteridge, H. The truth about the music we teach: Professor Nathan Holder. In *Let's Talk About Race in the Early Years* (pp. 116-134). Routledge.

[14] Jenkins, P. (2023), Exploring Cultural Diversity Through Music: Curriculum Ideas for Teachers. Available at: https://worldmusicday.co.uk/exploring-cultural-diversity-through-music-curriculum-ideas-for-teachers/ (Accessed: 02 January 2025)

[15] Garfias, R. (2004) Music: the Cultural Context. National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka. p.8

[16] Crooke, A., Forde Thompson, W., Fraser, T. and Davidson, J. (2023), Music, social cohesion and intercultural understanding: A conceptual framework for intercultural music engagement (28), 1.

Connecting through developmental differences

Children in the early years develop at different rates, but some children may need more help than others. Developmental differences have a range of causes, including disability, neurodivergence and experiencing trauma or neglect. Music is a positive way to engage neurodivergent or disabled children, including those with sensory impairments impacting their vision, hearing or both. It is important for practitioners and caregivers to understand a child's unique needs, preferences and interests to make music accessible to them.



Supporting pre-verbal children

Children typically babble and vocalise before they begin to speak. Caregivers respond to these sounds to show interest in their child. Children who need extra help developing communication skills usually babble in tuneful, rhythmic strings before they learn to use words. By mirroring a child's sounds and utterances, adults can create opportunities for serve-and-return interactions in a way that suits the child's developmental stage and builds an emotional connection to their caregiver.

Supporting deaf or hearing impaired children

Music can be made accessible to deaf children through environmental modifications. This means creating an optimal listening environment for them by reducing echoes (e.g., by providing soft furnishings to absorb sounds) and keeping background noises to a minimum.

Reports from audiology or a teacher of the deaf can help clarify the pitches and volume a child can hear. Experimenting with different pitches, volumes and tones can help you understand and make a note of sounds the child responds to. Children can be encouraged to listen to songs while using other senses, such as feeling vibrations or watching videos, to create a multisensory experience. This is especially important considering that many young children experience conditions like glue ear which can cause temporary hearing loss.

Supporting children who find transitions difficult

Some children find it hard to start and end activities, or to move from one area to another (e.g., from outside to indoors or from nursery to home and vice versa). Music can signal transitions during the day, which can help to make the day more structured and predictable. Children need repetition to associate certain songs or sounds with key transitions during their day – it is better to use the same song to signal the end of the day, for example, rather than changing the song often.

Supporting visually impaired children

Music can also foster inclusion and belonging for visually impaired children. If a child is responsive to physical touch, a hand-over-hand approach can be used to model movements to music, so the child can join in with group-based dancing. The child should be seated as close to the source of the sound as possible so they can investigate instruments through touch. Ensure that they have enough space to move their bodies to the music alongside the other children, so they are safe and included.

Please note that this section provides some starter ideas rather than an exhaustive list of strategies.

Reflections:

- Do children in your settings have an ‘all about me’ page that lists their favourite songs and instruments?
- How do children with additional needs in your setting respond when they hear their favourite song or music?
- Does the child respond differently when you change your voice to a more sing-song tone?
- Are you using music and sounds to signal key transition points during the day?
- Are there any songs caregivers use at home to signal key transitions for their child that could be incorporated into your setting?



Connecting with emotions

Music can help with emotional regulation. It can invoke feelings of nostalgia that influence our mood, helping us feel more relaxed or invigorating us when we need an energy boost.

For people in conditions where basic needs are met, music is a pleasant distraction from life. In other circumstances, music can be used as an informal, self-selected tool to manage symptoms of mental health problems like low mood. For people facing circumstances like extreme poverty, war and abuse, music is a method of raising the human spirit. This is because music can be created anywhere, using anything available – which, in some circumstances, can be an act of subversion.



The first sound babies hear is the heartbeat, which has musical properties due to its rhythmic nature. Changes in our heart rate often indicate when we are calm or stressed. Many psychological interventions are based on changing pathways to physiological responses, such as using deep breathing to lower the heart rate. The earliest way this happens for humans is through co-regulation, which is when the nervous system of one person calms the other. Caregivers offer this by holding a baby close so they can hear their heartbeat and be soothed through skin-to-skin contact.

If you have had a baby recently or have been around someone with a baby, you will likely have heard them using white noise to help the baby soothe and sleep. This is comforting for babies as it mimics the sounds they hear in the womb. Caregivers often sing or play music like lullabies to babies to soothe them to sleep. This is another way that repetition can help babies develop an understanding of daily routines through music and song.

The ability to differentiate emotions in music emerges in very young babies. A study carried out on a small number of infants found that babies responded differently to happy and sad music.[17] This shows just how early on babies can develop an awareness of different emotions conveyed through music.

Reflections:



- Do you have favourite songs or sounds that you listen to that help you feel soothed, or activated and invigorated? What is it about the songs that make you feel that way?
- Are there songs that you play to children in your setting at different times of the day? What effect do these songs have on the children?

[17] Nagy, E., Cosgrove, R., Robertson, N., Einhoff, T., & Orvos, H. (2022). Neonatal Musicality: Do Newborns Detect Emotions in Music?. *Psychological Studies, 67*(4), 501-513.

Summary

Music allows connections to be made before a baby is born. It creates opportunities for shared experiences between babies, caregivers, siblings, peers and practitioners. Memories we make when we listen to music last a lifetime, bringing a sense of respite or liveliness when it is most needed. Given that music can be created anywhere using any object available or our voices, it can be used to signal joy and resistance in difficult circumstances.

Music makes learning fun for all children. In early years settings, disabled children can be included through planned activities that allow them to enjoy music in a multisensory way. We hope that you have fun using music to help children bond, learn and thrive!

Further resources

Birth to 5 Matters: **Expressive arts and design resources**

BBC: **Bring the noise: early years music**

BBC: **Nursery rhymes and songs**

Family Music Hub: **https://www.thefamilymusichub.org/community**

National Deaf Children's Society: **Deaf-friendly music teaching**

Youth Music: **https://youthmusic.org.uk/**

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