



Commentary

Engaging the young child in self-directed music play.

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There are two avenues through which to engage young children in musical experiences and learning in early childhood centres: self-directed play and the more formal group time play. Both are important and valuable. The crucial element that must be at the centre of both avenues is play. Play is learning for the young child - it is their work, and they can work very hard! By looking at the world of sound and its fascination from the young child's point of view, we can, as early childhood educators, help to stimulate the child's natural interest in sound and music. By sharing experiences and ideas, and by exploring sounds ourselves, we can value and encourage the child's musical play in an everyday context.

There are many ways that early childhood teachers can support a child's playful music learning. The bonus for educators is that we find ourselves on the receiving end of a constant stream of invention and new ideas from the children. Children's natural musical behaviour includes the spontaneous invention of rhythms, chants, patterns and variations of known songs (Lum & Campbell, 2007). These can be acknowledged and shared with other children, or used in planned activities. In this way children, through play and group music, create a cycle of innovation and creativity. An individual child's innovation can then be re-introduced to the larger group, extending the musical ideas in the free play.

Group music and free music play

Music time in small groups is invaluable for creating the structures needed for many music games that the children love. Guidance is needed to help the children form circle groups, to share, take turns, rotate leadership and to co-ordinate moving and singing together when required. In any musical activity there needs to be an invitation from the educator, asking the children for their ideas, preferences or improvisation in movements, sounds, voices, words and even changing the game altogether. It is always worth trying out the children's suggestions.

There is learning for the child in what doesn't work just as much as in what is successful.

Self-directed learning can be supported by having a part of the pre-school set up for free play, where noisy play is allowed in special places, where there are stimulating objects and/or instruments to play with (Kenny, 2004). Engaging ideas on how to use the instruments can be stimulated by the educator sitting down informally to play with the potential sounds before leaving the children to pick up and continue if they wish.

The educator can support a child's free play by noticing a child's own spontaneous discoveries, and be ready to value and respond appropriately (Morin, 2001). Acknowledging and valuing how children feel about their play is important. Sometimes, stepping back to give the child the uninterrupted time and space they need to follow an internal exploration or idea without interfering is the most appropriate thing to do. A child's discoveries, ideas



and improvisations in free play can then be picked up by the educator to share with the other children in group time. For this flow between free play and organised to really work, it is essential that there be lots of opportunities in group music time for the children's input to direct activities. This valuing of a child's play stimulates the flow back and forth between the teacher and child.

Exploring sounds is noisy - there is no way around this. Music can be described as organised sound, and this means that what constitutes 'music' can and is a very subjective descriptive term. This needs to be kept in mind so that the exploration while it sounds to us like noise, is actually a rich play of textures, feelings, and discovery for the children (Kemple et al, 2004). Providing special places as mentioned earlier allows and encourages the children to enjoy this type of 'noisy' play.

What do I need to know about music?

It may seem that you, the educator, need to know a lot about music to create these making opportunities in music. One of the most important things to consider when directing is your own musical exploration. By exploring sounds in free play alongside the child the teacher is on equal terms with the child. Playing around with a wooden spoon and an ice cream bucket found in the music corner is about exploring. With such simple objects there are lots of ways of making sounds by hitting, rubbing, stirring - all these make different sounds. The texture of sounds, the feeling of making sounds, the impact of sounds combined, or the thrill of a rhythmic movement all become part of the making experience.

Rather than directing a child on how to make these sounds, teachers can sit for a minute with some objects and experiment to find how many different sounds can be made. A child watching this near-by is very likely to see what is engaging and want to try it out for themselves. A musically trained teacher must be aware at this point that it is often too easy to inadvertently interrupt a child's physical and aural exploration and physical awareness by suggesting, for example, that the hitting or stirring would be 'better' if it fits into an even beat. Despite the good intentions, corrections can have the effect of extinguishing a child's musical play (Berger & Cooper, 2003). In group times the children will ideally have had many opportunities to enjoy playing and joining in with an even beat in group time. The children may or may not take the given ideas with them into free play. Approximations of a regular beat, or enjoyment of a more random beat are the more likely outcomes. Recall that regular is not more 'right' than the random in play.

Creating special places for free music play

Creating a giant 'Music Box' can give the children a special place for noisy play without disturbing the other children. The very large cartons that fridges, washing machines come in can be lined with egg cartons or additional cardboard or fabric on the inside. A 'window' that gives the children easy climbing-in access but inhibits running in and out ensures that one or two children can be playing around with instruments inside without too much interference.

An outside 'Sound Bar' offer children opportunities for free play outside, where the noise is not so disturbing. The bar may be just a strong rope strung between two trees, or a wooden beam erected especially for the purpose, or even just sounds making objects on a wire netting fence. On the bar, about 60 centimetres apart and a metre off the ground, and using ties



that are only a few centimetres long, hang a selection of weather proof items that may or may not be actual instruments. 'Found Sounds,' ordinary objects from the household or the hardware shop, for example, can be engaging objects for sound play that can be first discussed at mat time. Even a variety of hanging containers for example, made of different materials (wood, lacquer, tin, or plastic) will do to begin with. Changing the items every couple of weeks is a good idea to maintain interest. By tying up a wooden beater between every two or three objects, with enough length to reach them, children can then play together in small groups or on their own. The 'Musical Fence' is another simple idea. I can remember that as a small child I was mesmerised by the sound of my pencil 'racketting' along the corrugated iron of a shed and derived huge enjoyment from the contrast when it went on to the chicken wire fence next to it, to make a '*clicketting*' sound. An adult would not necessarily understand that for me this was a musically satisfying activity. If possible it would be a good idea to attach some larger sheets (about a square metre each) of different building materials onto a perimeter fence. For example a piece of corrugated iron, mini-orb, laser-light roofing or some lengths of decking with the fine corrugations create excellent playing opportunities. Weatherboard is also fun for the children to play with, using sticks.

Creating a flow between free play and organised music activities

Mystery Sounds:

Music play is as much about listening as it is about feeling. Playing 'mystery sound' games is intriguing and fascinating to children. Recording some ordinary sounds heard in any home: water (boiling in a jug, or going down a sink, or the loo), a car door slamming (from inside and outside the car), and the engine starting, the jangle of keys, or the sound of cutlery being taken out of a drawer, the fridge door closing. All these sounds can become a great guessing game for the children. In following this up with 'mystery sounds' in the pre-school can be made by the children for others to identify, and so they make their own 'mystery sound' tapes to play for the others to listen to.

Sound Effects for Stories:

In free play and in group time, the sound bar and other instruments can be used to explore contrasts in sound to help tell a story. For example, putting out three kitchen items to play with, with the aim of deciding which has the biggest or loudest sound, which has the softest or smallest sound and which is in between can be a valuable activity.

Linking the above activity to the Three Billy Goats Gruff story, each of the goats can each be given their own sound, and children could be asked to decide on which sound fits each character. By asking for more suggestions for all the other sounds in the story a sound canvas can be built up. The 'hoof beats' on the bridge, the troll, the grass rustling, the water trickling, etc. This can all be done quite informally throughout the telling the story with the help of the children in deciding on the appropriate sounds. By repeating the activity a few days later the children can take some ownership of the sound effects once more by experimenting and improvising further. The next time with the children after explaining to a child that you are finding out which one of the things hanging on the bar is the little billy goat, the big billy goat then they can start to play with this idea themselves. Many stories can be used in this way. Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Jack and Jill, and the Three Pigs are all traditional stories that lend themselves to the use of sound effects.



Another simple activity to encourage the children to make up their own sound stories, is to introduce a wooden spoon along with a sponge and a saucepan lid, for example. Draw eyes and noses with text on each of these, asking the children - is this a happy spoon or a sad spoon or a cranky spoon? Put the appropriate mouths on each, then ask the children "Why is the spoon cranky"? and as they find reasons, a little story can unfold. Introduce the idea that the spoon can 'play' on the other characters to get different sounds which could reflect what is happening. Quite quickly the children will take over the story around sounds. Young children learn by playing with and interacting with their environment (Kenney, 2004).

A 'real life' example

This is an episode detailing how the children's free play and group music time can interact productively.

After watching a group of children, assembling wooden blocks to build a house, one of the group went over to the music shelf where there were some tapping sticks left out for free play. He brought back some blocks and sat down with the others. He took one stick and planted it on the floor end up, and announced "This is big nail!" and began firmly tapping on it with the other stick, as if banging a nail with a hammer. Another child copied this, while another picked up the remaining stick and tried to balance it on top of the blocks, laughing when it rolled off.

Having noticed this, at the following mat time I acknowledged the boy by mentioning the way he had been hammering with the sticks. Using a little improvised song about building a house, I asked the boy to show everyone what he had been doing, and asked him if we could all do it like that. He very proudly agreed to this. We all tapped with one stick on to the other up-ended stick to make a rhythmic accompaniment to our song. I asked the children what other jobs have to be done for the building of our house. I didn't stipulate that the sticks had to be involved but they went on to improvise other building tasks with the sticks such as painting (using a stick to swish up and down with 'swish' sounds) and sawing wood (one stick rubbed against the other).

Conclusion

Children are very skilled at play, and given encouragement and acknowledgement, they are keen to find and share their ideas and discoveries. We may all be familiar with the structures and 'rules' that children like to use in creating their group games in the playground. If we look more closely it can be seen that music is nearly always combined with movement. Chanting, playing on something to make a sound, and singing little snippets of words, often in a very free style with only occasional conforming to beat or pitch in the formal sense are commonplace.

Free play can include all of these aspects with the added freedom of improvising freely. If we observe children while engaged with free play, either individually or in groups, we can learn a lot about how integral and spontaneous music making is for the child. We do not necessarily need to have musical training for this. This is one of the behaviours that is intrinsic to our species: one that we share with the children in our care. As caring adults we can consciously respond to the children's play with encouragement, valuing their pride in their discoveries. We can honour each little discovery which might be as incidental as tapping a chair leg in contrast to the seat, or



as complex as setting up a group of sounds to tell an improvised story and with their permission, this can be shared with the other children.

Music is made up of various opposites which greatly interest and excite children. Fast or slow, loud or soft, smooth or rough, high or low, close or far, might be descriptors used by the children in their own terms. High or low, and soft or loud might be described by a child as light and heavy, or big and small. By using the child's terms they carry meaning that the child has discovered for themselves. Later they will soon adapt to the more conventional terms, without losing that meaning derived from their own first-hand experience.

We need to honour the musicality of each and every child. As educators, this gives us both a great potential and a great responsibility. The potential is our own and each child's musicality. The responsibility is that we must give children the means for expressing and exploring this most natural of human behaviours. While there are some of us who exhibit special musical talents, just as some of us are born with particular athletic or mathematical talents for example, every child is born musical - it is as natural to us as breathing. It is our job to see that our children grow musically as well.

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