Play Along™

Music Together's Newsletter for Families

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How Children Grow Musically

As a Music Together teacher, I always particularly loved the infant class which serves as a one-semester introduction to the program for babies eight months and younger. I confess, however, that in my center only those under six months made it into this class rather than going straight to mixed-age; I preferred to start each semester with a classroom full of non-sitting, non-rolling little bundles of babyness. Working with babies this young was miraculous to me, a constant affirmation of the innate musicality of humans.

They were alert to each new song, they could sense when a song was ending, they noticed dynamics, and they responded to tempo changes. Perhaps most dramatically, they would coo in the tonality of a given song! The babies' frequent response to hearing their parents and caregivers singing a song was to shift their own habitual sounding pitch to meet the tonic (the resting tone) or another note from the song's main chord—in effect synchronizing themselves with the singers. While several years and many milestones away from having *basic music competence*—being able to sing in tune and move in a rhythmically accurate way—these infants inevitably expanded their parents' and caregivers' understanding of what it means to be "musical."

All children are musical. This is the cornerstone of the Music Together philosophy, and any of us who have taught the program can see that it is true. We see how, seemingly with no effort at all, children progress along a developmental path toward basic music competence in much the same way they learn language: by apparently absorbing it from their environment. How does this process happen, and what are some of the milestones? And if we are all musical, how is it that so many of us grow up thinking we're not?

Music-learning is in some ways analogous to language-learning. Both require an environment with which the child can interact in order to stimulate the learning process, and both have predictable stages. Similar to the way a child moves from babble to single words, then to two-word sentences, she moves tonally from what learning theorist Edwin Gordon and music psychologist Helmut Moog termed "music babble" to musical expressions of greater complexity.

An early milestone is the ability to hear notes in relation to each other, and therefore begin to produce two separate, detached pitches. Gradually, sequences of notes are put together and the child sings entire musical phrases. These phrases are not tonally accurate, but they do follow the general contour of the song. The child is able to process that the notes move higher and lower in a certain pattern, and she can approximate the overall pattern; she just doesn't yet have the fine discrimination to match every pitch.

Unfortunately, an adult hearing a two-and-a-half-year-old belt out an off-pitch rendition of "Happy Birthday" may not recognize that the child is following the contour, and the child's fine achievement may be interpreted as a failure. Think of how this contrasts with our reactions to a child's primitive attempts at speech. My daughter, for example, used to refer to the "twilight telegraph" scene in Disney's animated "101 Dalmations"—in which a message is passed from barking dog to barking dog all the way from London to the countryside—as the "pie-bite pebba-bap." Although no one outside the family could have guessed what

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Spring 2007

Dear Parents and Caregivers,

"So, what do YOU do?"

This ritual question from, say, the person sitting next to me on a plane ride is always a welcome challenge because as soon as I start talking about children and music, I know the image in the listener's mind will be a piano lesson. Similarly, although parents involved in Music Together classes recognize that their children are learning a great deal while also enjoying themselves immensely, the question many have at heart is, "When can my child *really* learn music?"—meaning, when can he start formal music lessons?

This is a loaded question. It's full of the natural longing parents have to give their child the good things life has to offer, but it's also based on the contradictory perceptions and expectations inherent in our musical culture. For example, parents wouldn't sign their children up for drama lessons before they had learned to talk, would they? Yet, by far, the majority of young children who begin traditional music lessons are not yet competent "speakers" of music.

This newsletter describes how—well before school age—a child can achieve this expressive ability to "speak" the language of music. What we call *basic music competence*, or the ability to sing in tune and to move with accurate rhythm, is the primary sign of music readiness for piano lessons or other forms of traditional music-learning that have performance as a goal. Yet the advice parents typically encounter is often something like the following: "If your young child can understand and follow directions, identify the numbers 1–5, recognize the letters A, B, C, D, E, F, and G, and sit still for fifteen minutes, he or she is ready for piano lessons."

Doesn't that put you right back in the music-lesson anxiety state, when, despite your love of music, you [choose one or all of the following]: certainly couldn't sit still, didn't like your teacher, feared the inevitable recital, and/or hated to practice?

It's likely that your kindergarten-age child is still developing the basic expressive abilities of his personal musical instruments—his body and voice. Perhaps he is in the "introspection phase" discussed in the lead article, or shows obvious rhythm or tonal readiness, but not both. You should also consider your child's small-motor coordination and his social readiness for learning in a small group or private lesson. While these abilities are maturing, your child can continue to benefit from Music Together mixed-age classes and preschool programs—or join group classes specifically designed for his age—which continue a playful, experiential approach. (For guidance about whether your child is ready for formal music lessons, ask your Music Together teacher, or see the full discussion on our website under Classes/For Enrolled Families.)

Most important of all is to continue to enjoy music in whatever way works for your family while your child's abilities emerge and mature. If you have been with us long enough to "get it," you understand how essential a role-model you are for your child. So, don't let the media do it without you—hum along, sing along, dance along, and play along on an instrument if you can. Drum your fingers on the table, whistle in the supermarket, and croon a lullaby at bedtime. And if you really want your child to study an instrument, sign up for lessons yourself! Then see what happens.

Kenneth K. Guilmartin
Founder/Director, Music Together LLC

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she was saying, I found this charming and didn't worry that my child might be "unlanguageable." A singing child, however, whose pitches are comparably garbled, may well be labeled as being "unmusical."

Soon the child will be singing bits and pieces of songs accurately, often coming in on the ends of phrases. Gradually, he'll align himself more and more with accurate pitch as two things happen: his continuing music experience helps him better discriminate pitches, and his growing control over his body makes him better able to adjust the sounds he makes. We call these different aspects of music-processing "reception" and "expression," and basic music competence arises out of the inner feedback loop that gets established between these two systems. As the feedback loop gives the growing child more information about his own accuracy, however, a curious thing often happens: he doesn't sing as much! Noticing that his own singing doesn't match that of the adults around him, he enters what Gordon calls the "introspection phase," marked by both deep listening and some self-consciousness.

I wonder how many children, at this critical point in their lives, wind up concluding that they just can't sing, instead of breaking through to tonal competence. Our culture generally offers little support for a child on the cusp of music competence. We have shifted away from actively making music for ourselves to paying others to make music for us. Because children learn by doing, the child who only consumes music passively—hearing recordings or watching TV—cannot develop musically as quickly and surely as the child who is actively engaged in music-making.

Music Together classes provide the musically rich environment which is so vital for music-learning from infancy and beyond, and can offer a three- to five-year-old safe passage through this vulnerable introspection phase. Because classes are non-performance oriented, they support the child's music growth without demanding it. The mixed-age setting removes any anxiety about "measuring up" to an age-based expectation, leaving the child free to explore, experiment, and play within the context of a whole-family activity.

This easy-going, non-formal approach has brought unexpected benefits to parents and caregivers, too. They find a supportive space in which they can sing and dance without fear of being judged, enabling them to provide a participatory role-model for their children.

Perhaps this is why the joy is so palpable in Music Together classes! Everyone is seen as being musical, from infants kicking their legs in response to a song to adults singing not-quite-on-pitch. And while we make no claims for adults, we've seen that in this environment even they can sometimes step out from an unfinished "introspection phase" to discover their true singing voices.

—Susan Pujdak Hoffman, Certified Music Together Trainer and 'PlayAlong' Editor

Ongoing Research and Development at CMYC®

The Center for Music and Young Children® (CMYC), developer of Music Together, was founded in 1985. CMYC is committed to helping families, caregivers, and early childhood professionals rediscover the pleasure and educational value of informal musical experiences. Rather than emphasizing traditional music performances, CMYC encourages family participation in spontaneous musical activity occurring within the context of daily life. CMYC recognizes that all children are musical and that every child needs a stimulating, supportive music environment to achieve basic competence in the wonderful human capacity for music-making.

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Parent & Teacher

A lovely partnership develops between Music Together teachers and the parents and caregivers in their classes. Although the teachers are specially trained (through an initial three-day training, ongoing skills and songs workshops, a certification program, teacher publications, and an online listserve), they see themselves more as facilitators, honoring the children's loved ones as the true teachers.

Some parents, particularly those who may feel self-conscious about moving or dancing or who have difficulty singing in tune, may find this an odd idea. Can a musically challenged parent have anything to teach his child? Won't he actually impede his child's music development? In fact, many Music Together teachers have watched children grow to basic music competence at the side of a parent who's enthusiastically singing off-key. How is this possible?

Our innate ability to make sense of the music of our culture is quite strong. A very young child can't explain scales, but will have a powerful sense of what "sounds right." As he grows, he will generally align himself with the musical norms of the culture, provided he has the opportunity to experience and experiment with them through live music-making. With Music Together, the child has not only the recordings but the classroom experience as an accurate musical touchstone.

The teacher initiates activities specifically designed to strengthen tonal and rhythmic skills, offering a clear *music* model. It is the parent, however, who is the essential music-*making* model. The child will instinctively look to her for approval and for clues about how to act in class. If the parent happily joins in, moving and singing with the teacher, the child will interpret this to mean that music-making is fun.

A child learns by doing. Therefore, the parent who inspires a music-making disposition in a child is actually giving him the key to music-learning—and opening the door to a lifetime of enjoyment.

For more information on teaching Music Together, please feel free to call us at (800) 728-2692 x329 or visit us online at www.musictogether.com.

Clap Your Hands

It's really quite simple to support your child's music growth at home: just sing and dance! By noticing the ways your child sounds and moves in response to music play, you'll begin to see how she develops musically over time.

An infant may kick his feet, wave his arms, or move his tongue in response to music. He loves contrast, and will be fascinated, for example, if you play vocally with a chant like "There's a Cobbler" from this winter's Drum song collection. Try speaking the chant in a high squeaky voice like a tiny little cobbler, then in a low resonant voice like a big giant, and see if the baby adjusts his own sounds upward or downward in response.

A toddler, in comparison, prefers ritual and repetition. She'll be attracted to the recurring movements for songs and begin to imitate them. As she learns to stand and control her body, she'll love a simple activity like rocking side-to-side, arms extended, while you sing "Ding Dong, Ding Dong" from this spring's Tambourine song collection. As she begins to sing words, look for her to join in at the ends of phrases; you can even make a game of it, allowing her to complete each phrase of a song as you sing.

A preschooler has a burgeoning imagination and will be filled with ideas for substituting sounds and movements in songs. In the Tambourine song collection, "Old Brass Wagon" is perfect for movement ideas ("wiggle your hips, Old Brass Wagon…") and "One Little Owl" provides for both sound and movement as you choose different animals to sit in the old oak tree. What does a turtle sound like? How does a platypus move? Your creative preschooler will no doubt be able to show you.

At some point, your growing child will begin to sing spontaneously, an important sign that musical thinking is occurring. You can encourage this by making up your own little songs about things you and your child do together, or simply clap and move to her song to let her know you appreciate it. Playful musical interactions will teach your child a lot about sound and movement—and provide you both with lots of fun.

Child-safe and creative instruments are available at Music Together LLC. For a brochure or to place an order, you may contact us in any of the following ways: call (800) 728-2692 (x345) between 9 AM and 4 PM EST; email storeorders@musictogether.com; fax to (609) 466-9123; or visit www.musictogether.com.

How has Music Together affected your life?

Call and Response

This column usually dedicates itself to answering typical questions from parents and caregivers. In this issue, however, Music Together would like to ask you the questions and invite your replies for possible inclusion in this fall's 20th Anniversary newsletter.

That's right, we're about to celebrate our twentieth anniversary! In 1987, Ken Guilmartin and Lili Levinowitz were true pioneers in the field of early childhood music education, with their unique vision of developmentally appropriate mixed-age music classes supported by home materials and emphasizing parent participation. In our next issue we'll tell you how that vision expanded to preschools and older children, and we'll describe the impact this program has had on the lives of those who create and teach it.

We'd also like to tell your stories. How has Music Together affected your life? Did your children stay involved with music-making after leaving the program? Did you decide to pick up an instrument after many years' rest, or perhaps join a community chorus? Have you had the "it's a Music Together world" experience of meeting others on playgrounds or airplanes who know the same songs as you?

And what were some of the non-musical effects on your family of sharing class time together? For those of you who attended with more than one child, were classes a place where ordinary rivalries dissolved into harmony? What did Music Together teach you about play and joyousness?

Send your thoughts and anecdotes by May 15 to Susan Pujdak Hoffman at shoffman@musictogether.com.

Thanks!

Outreach

"It's just magic," says MaryAnna Alderete of the Music Together classes she teaches at the West County First 5 Center in California. "I could feel the magic in here from the beginning. These moms joined in singing the very first day! They were so open to moving their bodies and feeling that music is fun, and the children were doing all the movements with me right away."

Part of a state-wide initiative to provide children prenatal to age five with an integrated system of early childhood development services, the West County First 5 Center offers classes including art, movement, nutrition, and parenting at locations in Richmond and San Pablo. Many classes are designed for adult/child participation, making the center a natural fit for Music Together, which emphasizes parents as role-models.

The center offers free Music Together classes to low-income families, many of whom are Spanish-speaking. "It's beautiful to see MaryAnna with the children," says Alexina Shepard, director of the center. "She's very authentic. She's nurturing and relaxed with the families, and she shines when she sings and leads them in activities." MaryAnna also shares her knowledge of children's music development with the families. Parents are noticing new music behaviors at home, such as the two-year-old who turned his dinner utensils into instruments, or the little girl who sings the last word of every line as her mother sings the songs.

Offered through East Bay Music Together, this program is just one of center director Julie Tanenbaum's outreach efforts. Her center has also brought Music Together to incarcerated mothers and their children, and, this spring, will run classes at Children's Hospital in Oakland. MaryAnna has already signed up to teach.

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a research-based, developmentally appropriate music and movement program for infant, toddler, preschool, and kindergarten children with their parents, teachers, and other primary caregivers. A curriculum pioneer since 1987.

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