

# the role of music in your classroom

by Jennifer Jones

Where does music fit into your classroom?

- For some of us it is that little box on our lesson plans that we fill with a few song titles and then move on.
- For others, music in the classroom refers to songs sung at circle or transition times.
- Sometimes it is that fleeting moment when you thought handing out percussion instruments to all 20 of your students at the same time was a fantastic idea.

But how much thought do you really give to music's role in your classroom? Are these its only purposes or can it be more?

## The importance of music

According to developmentally appropriate practices, play is the most vital component of any early childhood curriculum. Through play, children develop



Jennifer Jones began working with young children as a Sunday School teacher in high school. She has pursued her passion for early childhood ever since. She holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in Early Childhood Education and has taught preschool for six years in a variety of settings. She is currently a lead teacher for Head Start at a not-for-profit organization in Chicago.

social, emotional, and cognitive skills; children express themselves physically, represent feelings, and acquire fundamental concepts and skills (Bredekamp & Copple, 1995). But are they independent of each other? According to van der Linde (1999), play and music are interrelated activities. They are both essential components to a child's development, but this is not always understood. There are many areas in early childhood where music and play are inseparable and others that are strengthened by the pairing.

Play and music are both important for children's cognitive development:

- Songs can be used to teach new concepts and to introduce new vocabulary.
- Songs give children the opportunity to explore adult roles. Children playing with dolls in a dramatic play area will sing lullabies to their dolls or hum while cleaning, emulating what they have seen their parents do.
- Movement to music develops children's awareness of their bodies and what they can do. It can also help to develop feelings of self-confidence and fine motor skills.
- Listening to music can help teach children about the basic properties of music: loud, soft, fast tempo, slow tempo, and pitch. It can also lead to

further creative expression (Spodek & Saracho, 1994).

## The dynamic relationship between music and play in children's development

Early childhood classroom teachers have an opportunity to demonstrate the various uses for music including an accompaniment for dancing, relaxation, setting a mood, or a story. One of the best ways to incorporate music into the early childhood classroom is to relate it to other areas of the curriculum (Spodek & Saracho, 1994). Dodge and Colker (1992) agree that children's exposure to music can have an impact on all three key aspects of development (cognitive, social-emotional, and physical). Eliason and Jenkins (2003) also suggest that in the classroom, music has significant therapeutic applications as well. This gives teachers another way to help foster the emotional development of their students.

### A Classroom Example:

In my own classroom, music has several purposes and is frequently heard throughout the day.

- We use songs to help with transitions like clean-up time, circle time, or from

lunch to nap. Using songs as part of our routine helps children remember the schedule and to switch gears from one activity to another.

- We use music to teach new concepts. With each unit, I introduce new songs to the children to teach new vocabulary and concepts.

Example:  
(sung to “Mary Had a Little Lamb”)

Aileen’s name starts with A  
Starts with A  
Starts with A  
Aileen’s name starts with A all day long

Example:  
(sung to the tune of  
“Oh My Darlin’ Clementine”)

Sunday, Monday, Tuesday,  
Wednesday, Thursday, Friday,  
Saturday  
There are seven days, there are seven days, there are seven days in a week.

(Repeat from beginning.)

- Music is often used as a large motor activity, especially on rainy days when going outside isn’t an option. Through music and movement children develop large motor skills and explore concepts of rhythm and tempo.

Example: On a very cold day, when we were stuck inside, I offered the children a choice of what music to listen to — children’s music, Irish folk music, Arabic music, flamenco music, and classical music. We listened to each of these types of music in turn, moving to the different rhythms and tempos, pointing out how different music helps our bodies to move in different ways.

- Soft music often plays in the background. At any given moment you might walk into my classroom and hear classical, jazz, big band music, or music from a variety of cultures including Latin American, Arabic, and Celtic, to name a few.

But how does background music affect the learning environment?

### Music sets the tone

Every morning at 6:30 when I open my classroom, I put on a CD of classical music. I put it on because I enjoy starting my day that way. Two months ago, I traded shifts with my assistant for one day. I was unprepared for the level of chaos that greeted me when I walked in at 8:30. The children were running around the classroom, despite being redirected. They were yelling at each other and generally not listening. I asked what happened. She replied, “I don’t know. They won’t listen.” A few minutes later I realized that one of the favorite CDs for dancing was in the CD player, barely audible over the insanity. I turned it off, and between the two of us we calmed the class down. But how much difference could a CD make?

Music can set the tone for any situation. Several studies have been conducted regarding how music impacts behavior. It has been found that music can impact people’s willingness to help others (North, Tarrant, & Hargreaves, 2004), their purchasing habits (North, Hargreaves, & McKeendrick 1999), and their reactions to waiting (Hui, Dube, & Chebat, 1997). The classroom is no different. Chalmers, Olson, and Zurkowski (1999), Jackson and Joyce (2003), and Stoeckel (1999), all studied the effect of music on students and found that with music:

- Moods and performance improved.
- On-task performance increased.
- Anxiety levels were lowered.
- Behavioral incidents decreased.

Curriculum Area	Benefit to Development
Language arts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop new vocabulary</li> <li>• Learn new concepts</li> </ul>
Social development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interact with peers</li> <li>• Cooperate</li> <li>• Take turns</li> </ul>
Emotional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Express feelings</li> <li>• Soothe hurt feelings</li> <li>• Increase feelings of self-worth</li> </ul>
Cognitive development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop listening skills in songs requiring specific actions at specific times</li> <li>• Develop creativity and imagination by inventing their own song lyrics or dance moves</li> <li>• Increase attention span</li> </ul>
Physical development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore the numerous ways in which their bodies move</li> <li>• Improve balance and coordination</li> <li>• Enhance fine motor skills through finger plays</li> </ul>

In each instance, researchers concluded that music in the classroom could be of significant value to both students and teachers. Example: In the morning I put on a CD of Irish jigs and reels instead of our usual morning music because I felt like changing things up a little. The kids came in and at first just listened.

S: "This not our morning music."

Teacher: "I thought it would be good to try something different."

For a while the morning went on as usual. As more children came, the noise level went higher and higher, much more so than usual. As the morning progressed, the children began chasing each other around the classroom. After about 20 minutes, the noise level was such that you really couldn't hear the music anymore. I turned off the music and began trying to calm the children down. They were so wired! It took another ten minutes just to calm them enough so we could get ready to go outside.

Recent research on the impact of background music on the social interactions of preschoolers found that the number of positive child-to-child interactions increased when background music was introduced into the environment (Godeli, Santana, Souza, & Marquetti, 1996). They also found that the increase continued after the music had been removed from the environment.

There are many ways to include music in your program. Music can be a rewarding partner in the classroom. I encourage everyone to find a way to add a little music to your day. Let's watch Luz:

L: "Ms. Jennifer, I wanted listen to the music."

Teacher: "You would like to listen to some music?"

L: "Yes, I wanted the music the princess."

Teacher: "Princess music (classical)?"

L: "Yes."

I put on the classical music sampler and Luz proceeded to twirl around the carpet.

## References

- Bredenkamp, S., & Copple, C. (Eds.). (1995). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Chalmers, L., Olson, M., & Zurkowski, J. (1999). Music as a classroom tool. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 35*(1), 43-45.
- Dare, M. (Ed.). (2002). *The Mailbox 2001-2002 yearbook*. Greensboro, NC: The Education Center, Inc.
- Dodge, D., & Colker, L. (1992). *Creative curriculum for early childhood* (3rd ed.). Boston: Teaching Strategies, Inc.
- Eliason, C., & Jenkins, L. (2003). *A practical guide to early childhood curriculum* (7th ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Godeli, M., Santana, P., Souza, V., & Marquetti, G. (1996). Influence of background music on preschoolers' behavior: A naturalistic approach. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 82*, 1123-1129.
- Hui, M., Dube, L., & Chebat, J. (1997). The impact of music on consumers' reactions to waiting for services. *Journal of Retailing, 73*(1), 87-104.
- Jackson, M., & Joyce, D. (2003). The Role of Music in Classroom Management. (Report No. SO035028). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 479 098)
- North, A., Hargreaves, D., & McKendrick, J. (1999). The influence of in-store music on wine selections. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 84*(2), 271-276.
- North, A., Tarrant, M., & Hargreaves, D. (2004). The effects of music on helping behavior: A field study. *Environment and Behavior, 36*(2), 266-275.
- Spodek, B., & Saracho, O. (1994). *Right from the start*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Stoeckel, B. (1999). The Effects of Music on Age Group Swimmers' Motivation and Practice Behavior. (Report No. SP 039 695). Virginia: University of Virginia. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 448 160)
- van der Linde, C. (1999). The relationship between play and music in early childhood: Educational insights. *Education, 119*(4), 610-615.

## For more information

The Children's Music Network  
[www.cmnonline.org](http://www.cmnonline.org)

Children's Music Portal:  
Early Childhood  
[www.children-music.org/childrens-music/early\\_child.htm](http://www.children-music.org/childrens-music/early_child.htm)

Silberg, J., & Noll, C. (1998). *The I can't sing book*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Silberg, J., & Schiller P. (2002). *The complete book of rhymes, songs, poems, fingerplays, and chants*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.