

The Importance of Music in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers

by Cheryl Gallien

Most people are influenced by music one way or another, at some time or another. Some play instruments, others sing, and the remaining group becomes the audience—they are the listeners. There are many aspects to music: hearing, listening, dancing, singing, and physically making an instrument work. All of these factors affect humans, possibly as early as the prenatal period (Lagoni et al., 1996) when a fetus hears the music the mother hears, feels the rhythm of her movements, or hears the beating of her heart via the swishing rhythms of moving fluids. However, even if the pre-birth experience is not considered, the music heard shortly after birth remains influential. Studies and surveys show that music plays an important role in the lives of infants and toddlers.

Music has proven to be an essential part of caring for babies and toddlers because they respond to it in such a positive manner. Love of music seems to be an inherent characteristic of babies worldwide (Johnson-Green & Custodero, 2002), and mothers from virtually every culture foster that love (Treehub, 2002). Perhaps an infant's first after-birth experience with music begins when its mother sings a lullaby and gently rocks the baby back and forth. Or, perhaps, after she lays the infant down, she turns the music box key in the mobile suspended from the infant's crib. A new form of music is introduced when mother and father, and virtually any other caregiver, begin speaking in the sing-song language called "parentese" (*Communicating with infants and toddlers through music*, 2001). Not long after that, games that involve rhythmic movement of the extremities are introduced along with short rhyming ditties. These fingerplays and nursery rhymes are important components of early childcare. As the infant continues to grow, she soon becomes an active musical participant, eagerly adding her "voice" to the song. When she has developed enough physical strength, she joins in instrumentally, banging on pots, squeaking toys, or shaking rattles. By toddlerhood, she is swaying and bouncing and adding a variety of other movements to her musical repertoire. Developmentally, much has been accomplished through music and its various forms: it has promoted social interaction, contributed to emotional well-being, enhanced physical coordination, and aided in cognitive and language development (NAEYC, 1997).

The various forms of music promote social interaction in infants and toddlers. When the mother (or the caregiver in a childcare setting) sings to the baby, the baby responds, becomes attentive, and makes eye contact with her. Eventually, the interaction becomes a duet, an interchange of communication between mother and baby. Socialization has taken place. A relationship is developing.

At the toddler stage, music continues to play an important role in a child's social development. Toddlers enjoy playing games, and music encourages cooperative and group play along with developing social relationships. Music allows the toddler to be a "star" for a few moments, so he gets the undivided attention that he craves from anyone who might be in the vicinity. Music is also a major avenue in holding a group of young children together, both literally (holding hands in a circle singing game) and figuratively.

Because the very nature of music is sensual, it contributes much to the emotional well-being of the infant and toddler. Most parents (and caregivers) can attest to the fact that singing lullabies soothes a young child. Music helps relieve the tensions of any emotional stress the infant or toddler may be feeling (Honig, 2004). The child can then communicate his feelings through physical relaxation or smiling as well as verbally if able. Music not only allows for release of

tension, it is also used to express happiness, sadness, excitement, and anger. Music is a great communicator.

Physical coordination is promoted by music through motion. Both gross and fine motor skills are affected. Young babies energetically move their arms and legs when lively music plays, and older babies bounce and sway. Toddlers wave their arms, jump, and turn. Music also provides a creative and productive channel to release physical energy (Lagoni et al., 1996). Fine motor skills are enhanced through fingerplays and the playing of instruments, such as when pressing the keys of a toy (or real!) piano or when covering the holes of a “flute” or tin whistle. Gross and fine motor skills are strengthened through movement and dance.

Music plays an important role in cognitive and language development. It doesn’t matter, at first, that the very young child can’t pronounce the words, or that she isn’t sure what the words mean (Honig, 2004). The sound of the music will encourage the child to make an effort to try to say the words. Eventually, the meaning of the words will come, especially if there are meaningful motions being performed by the teacher along with the singing. Singing also helps young children concentrate on learning tasks and aids in establishing rituals. Music encourages dramatic play and aids in the understanding of concepts, including quantity, number, and space. Many of the songs that toddlers love end in rhyme. It is an important cognitive achievement when young children learn that two words that sound the same are rhymes (Honig, 2004).

Music is a strong motivator to language development. Toddlers commonly sing long phrases of familiar songs, even though they customarily speak in two- or three-word phrases (Honig, 2004). They are not simply reiterating familiar phrases, but are learning and building vocabulary (NAEYC, 1997). Eventually, the child will develop the ability to put his own words to the tunes of these now very familiar songs. Music also aids in the learning of foreign languages. What a sense of accomplishment a toddler feels when he can sing, for example, “Frère Jacques” (Honig, 2004)!

As with many other aspects of life, variety in music is important. Because each child is an individual, she will likely respond more to certain types of music over others. Therefore, it is good to expose children to many different kinds of music, including ethnic and international music, both vocal and instrumental. Children, even very young children, do have preferences, and they react according to those preferences (Johnson-Green & Custodero, 2002). In general, like adults, most infants and toddlers prefer consonant music, music that is harmonious in sound, over dissonant music, music that suggests unrelieved tension and requires resolution (Trehub, 2002). Very young children, infants especially, tend to prefer maternal performances over recorded material. Recordings lack the familiarity of mother’s voice and the emotive qualities that mother puts into her own baby-tailored performances (Trehub, 2002).

Exposing infants and toddlers to diverse types and styles of music is one way of providing a multicultural education (NAEYC, 1997). Many cultures include celebrations that have their own unique songs, dances, and sounds of musical instruments. It is through this special music that ethnic beliefs and values are often passed on to the next generation (Lagoni et al., 1996). At home, some parents immerse their children in the music of their cultural heritage to aid in developing bilingualism along with developing a cultural awareness (Johnson-Green & Custodero, 2002). Being culturally aware includes recognizing the traditions of non-international local communities. Schools may include seasonal songs in their curriculum. Parents may include religious songs and music in their home environment. Music in all these forms enriches the development of infants and toddlers.

The music in mothers' speech plays a very important part in the emotional growth of infants and toddlers. When a mother talks to her infant, the sing-song speech she uses is repetitive, rhythmic, and flowing. It communicates to the child the love she feels towards him. It soothes her child and makes him feel secure. It is slightly different for a child whose mother is deaf. Although she may not have use of her voice, a deaf mother can achieve similar goals in a very different way. Just as hearing mothers speak a vocal "motherese," deaf mothers use a signed form of "motherese." Their signed messages to infants are more rhythmic, repetitive, and emotionally expressive than when they sign to adults. The voices of hearing mothers can be compared to music. The signed messages of deaf mothers parallel with dance. In either case, each mother provides emotional information to her baby through a musical form (Treehub, 2002).

Special needs children also benefit from music. According to the researchers of a project that dealt with music therapy for vulnerable infants,

Scientists know that...early communication is very important for an infant's development, and children who are deprived of it can become upset or withdrawn. It is also suggested that a lack of contingent interactions can affect brain development and result in negative long-term emotional effects for the infant (*Music therapy for vulnerable infants*, n.d.).

Music therapy in the neonatal unit could be an effective answer to this problem. While carefully responding to the infant's cue of engagement or disengagement, the music therapist hums or sings short melodies to the infant (so as to not overstimulate him) as she creates an experience involving each sense (auditory, tactile, and vestibular). The clinicians who provide the program believe that "music experiences are highly successful in providing opportunities for those critically important contingent interactions, and thus both facilitates the baby's recovery and the baby's normal development, and eases the baby's sense of isolation" (*Music therapy for vulnerable infants*, n.d.). Music therapy is not yet widely used with the prematurely-born. However, potential benefits exist. Research continues.

Music therapy has produced some good results with other groups of infants and toddlers who have a variety of other special needs, such as attachment disorders, autism, and Down syndrome. The goals of music therapy used in early intervention address socialization, self-expression, communication, motor development, and sensory stimulation. These are the same goals that are addressed by parents and teachers in general development. Music therapy works because music is highly motivating, stimulates the senses, and involves the child at many levels (*Early intervention*, n.d.).

Adopted infants and toddlers are another category of special needs children who benefit from music. Whether they are from near or from a faraway country, these children are being torn away from what is familiar. Because sounds are such a major part of the child's past history, it is wise for adoptive parents to stop and think about what those sounds might have been and try to incorporate some of them into the child's new life as she makes this major transition. Music is one avenue of sound that an adoptive parent can replicate with relative ease for his child with audio tapes and CDs. Music is comforting, and familiar music has an even greater ability to comfort (Miller & Ward, 2001).

Music has proven to be very beneficial to infants and toddlers in virtually all areas of development. Because this is the case, controversial claims have been made that music training increases brain power. The result has given momentum to an interest in music programs for mothers and their infants and toddlers. While parent-centered programs are

helpful to parents in a variety of ways, instructor-centered programs should be investigated with caution. These types of programs tend to emphasize “the ‘right’ music, the ‘right’ activities, and the ‘correct’ developmental timetable of musical exposure and training” (Trehub, 2002). Resulting stresses could conceivably take away the joy that music provides and negate the music’s beneficial aspects.

Developmentally, music plays a very important role in the lives of infants and toddlers. Because it is found in virtually all cultures the world over in its varying forms, infants and toddlers can benefit from it and its positive influence. As parents and caregivers encourage its use, social interaction is promoted. Due to its very nature, music’s sensuality contributes to the infant and toddler’s emotional well-being. Music through motion aids in the physical development of the infant and toddler, and cognitive and language development, including bilingualism, are enhanced by music and singing. As young children respond to many varieties of music, both vocal and instrumental, a multicultural education is encouraged. Even infants and toddlers with special needs benefit by the use of music in its various forms. Music is an important tool in aiding the development of infants and toddlers. Because music is portable, no infant or toddler need ever be deprived.

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