

Music in the Early Years

Apart from obvious enjoyment, many parents wonder what kind of music lesson is possible with such young children.

Many things are taught through song in the early years, such as language, number, safety rules and emotional concepts. This is because songs demand a certain level of involvement for a short space of time. As well as being enjoyable, they penetrate the subconscious and are easy to remember. (Advertisers are very aware of this!) Once they are absorbed, things like rhythm, rhyme, phrasing and meanings can all be explored in a way that never gets boring. Because songs can be enjoyed in so many ways, several levels can be taught at once. One child may only be getting to grips with the words or the beat, while others are looking for or suggesting rhymes, noticing patterns, or becoming aware of rising and falling melodies.

The social aspect of music imposes its own discipline. As I never use recorded music, the children quickly learn that the song will end soon, and then we can speak. Also, I can stop after each verse of a song if needed, and gradually lengthen the time between pauses to lengthen the children's attention span and deepen their involvement.

Instruments are also an enjoyable way of developing skills and exploring structure, beat, and other musical concepts. Bells and drums are used most often, but I also give the children a chance to choose from a selection of rhythm instruments.

As well as verbal cues and hand signals, as a conductor would use, the social aspect of playing with your group or waiting your turn imposes its own discipline. Some children are even able to work out the pattern of the song and join in on the "chorus" or a "big finish". Seeing a three-year old hold a pair of cymbals and not play them until the end is an amazing demonstration of the discipline of music!

As well as guitar and piano, I will bring in and play other instruments throughout the year: mandolin, violin, glockenspiel, and penny whistles. Seeing instruments played live is increasingly valuable, as more and more music these days is produced by pressing a button.

But to return to where we started, enjoyment of music is a lifelong gift, and one that I have the privilege of sharing with your children. Whether as a player, singer, dancer or active listener, I hope they will take it with them wherever they go. I always finish every lesson with favourite songs. Very often, a child who has not uttered a word for the whole lesson will put up their hand and ask for a particular song. And if anyone says they always ask for that, I tell them, "Some people have the same favourite song their whole life!"

Betty Pottinger