

Music, Language Can Be Child's Play

by Jeanine Taylor

Recent research indicates that music is crucial to language development. Both music and language share patterns, and offer an opportunity for joyful and meaningful interaction between parent and child. Parents are their child's first and most important teachers.

Here are some ideas for integrating music and language to enrich a child's learning experiences:

Musical Sounds

Research shows that children younger than 6 months can distinguish a wide range of speech contrasts. After 6 months, they begin to recognize characteristics of language, segment speech into word units and learn vocabulary. With your young child, you can:

- Explore a variety of "musical instruments" with different timbres (sound qualities); e.g., bang pots and lids, shake dried soup packages, or rub bumpy soup cans with a wooden spoon. As your child hears this variety of sounds, she is developing the listening vocabulary necessary for sound discrimination that precedes language.
- Use a wide variety of voice ranges as you talk to your child. Try singing a favorite song in a low voice and in a high voice. Varying pitches stimulates these first foundations for a baby or young child's learning the variety of sounds of language.

Rhymes

From infancy, children develop an awareness of rhythm, both in music and in language. You can highlight this rhythm when you:

- Select one of your favorite nursery rhymes and say it while gently tapping your child on the steady beat. The syllables of the words in the rhyme will form the rhythm.
- Use finger plays and chants to explore body parts. For example, tap your child's head while saying "head" rhythmically eight times.
- Try some simple rhymes with actions. Use a sing-song voice. Here are two:

"Blue bells, cockle shells, eevy, ivy, o-ver."

"Round and round the haystack goes the little mouse. One step, two steps, in his little house."

Taking Turns

Activities that encourage turn taking also help your child to learn this principle. With frequent opportunities for turn taking, your child will begin to understand the structure of the music in much the same way as he understands spoken language prior to speaking it. Here are some activities to try:

- Hide a simple shaker behind your back or under your legs. Have your child find it. Next time let her find a hiding place.

- Play a “You can’t catch me” crawling-singing game. Encourage your child to crawl and try to catch you. When he does, give an enthusiastic hug and sing “You caught me!” Then reverse roles and you try to catch him.
- Demonstrate a simple language pattern and let your child imitate it. Try “baa baa,” “cock-a-doodle doo doo” or “doo doo doo, cock-a-doodle doo.”

Labeling

Labeling your actions and your child’s actions helps her to connect physical movement with words that express concepts. Since repeated labeling helps children learn these concept words, sing as many children’s songs as you know. Add movement and label the movement; for example, sing “London Bridge is Falling Down.” Hold your child tightly and lean “down” while singing.

Vocal Play

Vocal play is a communication game between adult and child, involving exchanges of cooings, babblings, smiles, gestures and eye contacts. Its basic components consist of touching, observing, listening and imitating.

Vocal play is the beginning of articulation for a baby. The child must learn to use the tongue, gums and jaw muscles to produce sounds, which lay the basis for saying words. The following activities will help:

- Hold your child, look into his eyes, listen to his sounds and imitate them, then pause to see if he makes a sound back. Pausing and waiting demonstrates the important conversational element of turn-taking.
- Observe your child’s reaction to vocal play. She may watch your mouth to see how those interesting sounds are made. After a few repetitions of this activity, she may also begin to anticipate the next part of the sequence.
- Try some vocal play when sharing a simple board book with your child. Use a wide range of sounds. Point to the pictures and label them for him using an expressive voice.

Jeanine Taylor has been sharing music with children in various settings for over 15 years. She teaches weekly Kindermusik classes for children newborn to age 7 in her studio program, Kindermusik of Eugene. She is a certified Oregon teacher and also teaches children with and without special needs as a local preschool. She has two young children.

Original publication date: 01/24/2000 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon