

# How the Music Center Enhances Children's Development

Children develop musical skills and appreciation as they interact in the music center. While participating in music activities, children are also enhancing physical, language, social-emotional, and cognitive development. In today's world of high-stakes tests, many are using music's enhancement of cognitive development as a rationale for including music in the curriculum. However, as stated by Hetland and Winner (2001), "The arts are a fundamentally important part of culture, and an education without them is an impoverished education leading to an impoverished society. Studying the arts should not have to be justified in terms of anything else. The arts are as important as the sciences: they are time-honored ways of learning, knowing, and expressing" (p. 5).

## Music Skills and Appreciation

Even without adult intervention, children are natural, instinctive music makers. However, when we expose children to music through singing and playing instruments, they become more proficient and develop musical skills earlier (Kelley & Sutton-Smith, 1987).

When young children listen repeatedly to a style of music, they learn to prefer that music and these preferences become lifelong (Flohr, 2004; Peery & Peery, 1986). It is important, therefore, to expose children to music that broadens their repertoire. Learning to appreciate music from another culture or time period can also open the door to further interest and learning.

## Cognitive Development

Many studies have found a correlation between music abilities and academic achievement (Shore & Strasser, 2006). Music can aid in all areas of the child's development. A study of 106 preschool children found that those exposed to a systematic and integrated music program significantly increased their motor, cognitive, language, and social-emotional scores as assessed by the Preschool Evaluation Scale (McCarney, 1992).

Singing relevant songs can help children to learn science, math, and language concepts (Miche, 2002). History and geography can also be enhanced by examining the music of the time period or geographic area. Music can also assist with memorization. When items to be memorized are set to music, children remember them more readily (Sawyers & Hutson-Brandhagen, 2004).

Music is organized mathematically; music and math support one another (Sawyers & Hutson-Brandhagen, 2004, p. 46). As children hear and move to a beat or read music, they use one-to-one correspondence skills. As they recall a series of sounds or actions (head, shoulders, knees and toes) they gain seriation skills.

There is also a strong relationship between music and spatial-temporal intelligence (the ability to visualize and mentally manipulate spatial patterns). A review of nineteen studies found this relationship was even stronger if children also learned music notation (Hetland & Winner, 2001). Other studies support these findings. When researchers assigned preschool children to computer lessons, piano lessons, singing lessons, or no lessons, those who received piano lessons showed a 34% increase in spatial-temporal intelligence while there was no change in children in the other groups (Shaw, 2003). Researchers found similar results in elementary age children (Schellenberg, 2004).

Although there were reports that children who listen to classical music at an early age show greater learning potential (sometimes referred to as the Mozart Effect), this claim has been refuted (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Currently, there is no evidence to support a link between listening to music as an infant and brain size or school success (Fox, 2000; Hetland & Winner, 2001). However, one thing that we might learn from the study of music's effect on adults is that brain development appears to be related to active engagement with music (making music) rather than just passive listening to music (Fox, 2000).

## Motor Development and Rhythm

As children create music, they improve fine motor skills, coordination, and rhythm. Music also entices one to move and dance. Participating in movement or dance activities while listening to music enhances children's ability to sequence sound, recognize and respond to rhythm patterns, and discriminate melodies (Ferguson, 2005). As children dance to music, they increase coordination, flexibility, and motor skills. They develop body awareness and self-confidence. Like music, dance is an art form and a means of communication. Through dance, children communicate feelings, thoughts, and cultural values and beliefs.

When Curious Minds provided dance props in the music area, the children became more interested in using the center. They would often dance in front of the three full-length mirrors while rhythmically moving streamers or scarves. At other times, they would dance while playing a musical instrument. Young children naturally respond differently to sound and silence, fast and slow music, and different musical styles (Metz, 1989). However, adults can enhance children's movement repertoire by describing what children are doing, making suggestions, and modeling movement. Adults are powerful models. In one study, children using a music center during free play copied two-thirds of the teacher's modeled movements (Metz, 1989).

## Language Development

Like art, music is a form of communication conveying mood, ideas, and concepts (Ohman-Rodriquez, 2005). As children listen to music, they hear differences in sounds, assisting them not only with music making, but also with speech (Miche, 2002). Music can also help children develop fluency (smoothness of speech), pronunciation, enunciation (speaking clearly), and vocabulary (Aquino, 1991). For example, children who are involved in music activities such as reproducing sound sequences, melody discrimination, and singing combined with motor activities and visual stimuli display a significant increase in vocabulary (Moyeda, Gomez, & Flores, 2006).

## Social Development

Music links children to their cultural heritage, assisting them to acquire cultural beliefs and values. Listening to music also exposes children to other times and cultures and provides the opportunity to gain appreciation for them. In addition, as children create music together, they engage in a metaphorical experience, where different instruments combine to make a unique sound that no individual instrument could produce. Through this process, they learn that to make beautiful music, you must have unity and work together.

## **Emotional Development**

From the time of Plato and Aristotle, music has also been viewed as therapeutic. Today more than seventy universities offer degrees in music therapy (Greata, 2006). Music helps to create and manipulate moods. It “has the ability to relax, give pleasure, irritate and deafen us, stimulate, excite, make us feel happier or sadder” (Federico, 2002, p. 534). With these mood changes also comes physiological changes to our heartbeats, blood pressure, and breathing (Federico, 2002).

As we have learned, through music children not only gain music skills and appreciation but also enhance cognitive, motor and rhythm, language, social, and emotional development. While children and adults naturally engage in music, a well-planned center can enhance their development.

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