

The magic of music

By Julia Priest

PRE-VERBAL LANGUAGE FOR INFANTS

IN RECENT YEARS, EDUCATED PARENTS have fought back against school system cutbacks of music programs, both those intended for all children and electives such as instrumental lessons and band. Besides the obvious pleasures and cultural enrichment of music, parents cite research showing that musical participation aids the development of mathematical and spatial intelligences, teaches consistency and perseverance, encourages solitary endeavors as well as teamwork, and enhances creativity.





MUCH LESS WELL KNOWN, however, are the effects of preschool musical participation. Indeed, special attention to music and movement benefits children, even babies, well before they can sing or play an instrument. Educational opportunities for parents and infants reinforce this connection.

A relaxed, process-oriented music class for infants encourages parent/child bonding, promotes large and small motor development, cultivates concentration and focused listening, and bolsters self-awareness and confidence.

All children are born with musical potential, and a rich musical environment in childhood makes the difference between those who grow up to achieve their potential to sing or play an instrument for personal pleasure, and those who go around for the rest of their lives saying, "You don't want to hear me sing; I can't carry a tune. I love listening to music, but I look geeky when I dance."

Indeed, one of the ways classes benefit families is that the adults painlessly increase their musical confidence. The people who claim to be tone-deaf usually end up realizing that their early music development was neglected or, in some cases, arrested by a few harsh words from a parent or teacher.

American babies are bathed in verbal language. Their caregivers talk to them and read them boardbooks. Babies overhear adult conversations, phonecalls, radio and television. They see adults reading books, newspapers, magazines, and even doing crossword puzzles. However, since our culture places less emphasis on non-verbal communication, most babies are not bathed in musical, non-verbal communications—which are the language that babies most naturally comprehend and utilize.

As a new mother, I tried almost every mom-baby music class I could find. After eliminating those with a mind-numbing repertoire or a deafening sound-scape, I found a national program with child-friendly music and ultimately became a teacher. Every morning in class, I saw how parents delight in their children's musical responses; parents often shared stories about memorable

musical moments from outside of class, too. Sandra Lapa, a native of Portugal, now raising her family in Waltham, feels that the program has enhanced her bilingual three-year-old's language skills. "Many times I've been pleasantly surprised when I hear Yahni carrying a tune. She's able to decipher the correct words of a song before I do. The roles get reversed: suddenly she's telling me what the words are and how the music goes. I love it!"

Singing is effective in energizing babies

All enrolled families are supplied with recordings and matching songbooks which expand on the class experience at home. Lili Levinowitz, co-author of the curriculum, produces much of the ground-breaking research on which today's best practices all around the field of early childhood music education are based.

Levinowitz says, "Singing is the single most effective way to soothe, engage, relax, or energize a baby. Research suggests that the average parent in the U.S. today knows about five songs. As a new parent, the day can seem never-ending if you only know five songs. A music-and-movement class for parents with newborns and infants broadens the parents' repertoire of fun, engaging songs to use and to adapt for their family's specific needs."

Singing also strengthens the immune system. When researchers used Q-tips to take saliva samples from singers before and after singing, they found that singing increases secretion of immunoglobulin-A. The more passionately the singers sang, the more of an immune protein boost they got. This result suggests that moms and dads should sing to keep themselves healthy, and to model for their children a behavior that will increase their children's chances of leading healthy lives.

Lauren Lookner of Newton has been bringing her first child to music class throughout her second pregnancy. Baby number two, Cheri, was born at the Brigham this November. While Lauren was still otherwise occupied, father Sam crooned the our *Hello Song* to the newborn girl. Cheri quieted almost instantly and was soothed. Research shows that babies can hear while still in the womb. Having heard the *Hello Song* so many times, Cheri was already able to recognize her favorite song!



Healthy distraction

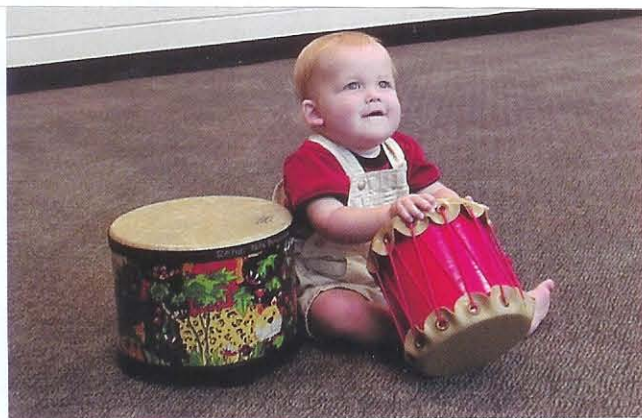
Many parents take advantage of their children's musical favorites by varying the words to fit the needs of the moment. Diaper changes and other daily routines go more smoothly when there is a private ritual song to distract the baby. As a baby becomes a toddler, other songs can elicit cooperation in all the mundane necessities, such as putting on shoes or brushing teeth. Personalized songs are all the more effective if you've laid the groundwork for them from the child's earliest months.

Although recorded music can be a convenient short-term pacifier, and a great way to expand your parenting repertoire, nothing is as good as a live performance, by you, for and with your baby. Research shows that babies prefer human sounds to mechanical



sounds; melodic vocal contours to prosaic, matter-of-fact speech; and of course, their own parents' voices to anybody else's voice.

Early music activities include object-permanence games such as peek-a-boo. Early childhood educators can show parents how to provide their baby with grist for the development of cause-and-effect understanding: if I wave my arms around like this, Mom starts up again with that song I love. Even pre-verbal babies love to have their pretend-play growth stimulated when their parents hold them in their laps and act out "experience songs"—songs about driving the car, riding a horse, washing the dishes, taking a bath. Parents are delighted to discover their latent improvisational abilities.



When parents feel confident in playing musically with their babies, it's a fantastic experience for both of them. Imagine it from the baby's point of view: the most beautiful face in the world smiling a huge smile at me, sparkling eyes, my favorite voice crooning a soothing melody, being held by warm, soft hands, moving gently through the air, tracking how the sounds and movements fit together rhythmically. For the parent, there's the terrific sense of improved parenting efficacy, the beautiful feeling of getting to know each other through music and movement, and building loving, memorable experiences for the two of you. **N**

Julia Priest is the Director of Music Together of Newton. A singer and teacher since 1987, Julia says, "What I've learned about pacing, and energy by teaching Music Together has brought my life as a performing musician to a new level. There's something spiritual about getting people into sync with each other." In May, 2004, the Center for Music and Young Children in Princeton, NJ awarded Julia Music Together® Teacher Certification Level I status for outstanding achievement in teaching, musicianship, program philosophy, and parent education.

Your baby's musical ear

How can you tell that your baby is responding to music?

During the music, the baby may stop usual movements or activity and seem to stare intently or freeze. Then when the music stops, the baby will often change activity again. Here are some of the ways babies respond to music:

- Feet are outstretched
- Feet kick
- Eyes "brighten" or change focus
- Tongue moves in repetitive motion
- Eyes move to where the sound source is.
- Hands clench
- Hands wave wildly in the air
- Middle of torso moves rhythmically
- Baby makes cooing sounds
- Baby smiles or giggles

Source: *Music Together--Babies*, Kenneth K. Guilmartin and Lili M. Levinowitz, Ph.D., Center for Music and Young Children, Princeton, NJ: 2003.

