

# PLAYful Musical Environments that Foster Learning: Listening, Making, and Moving to Music in Early Education Settings - for ECE Webinars -

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I have not learned how to teach music, but rather, I am engaging with how children learn when they are learning to be musical. The difference between knowing what you've been taught to teach and understanding how children are learning are distinct concepts.

In language, creating and improvising conversations is effortless even for three-year-olds. But in music, why do relatively few musicians learn to create and improvise?

Answer: It is because reading and writing music gets introduced too early. Learning to read and write can stifle or significantly slow down creativity and improvisation.

Symphony musicians are excellent at what they do. They have extraordinary technical skills. Most are exceptionally musical even, but many have not gotten to what I consider to be the highest level of music achievement, that is, being creative, without the help of notation, and having the capacity to improvise music: that is, to think in your musical mind what has just been played, understand the contexts in which you are listening or playing, forming new musical thoughts, and then taking those musical thoughts and executing them through your voice or an instrument—and do all of that continuously in cycles of what? A 1/10th or 1/20th of a second? It is a pretty extraordinary feat to be able to do this competently, let alone extraordinarily well, like musicians such as John Coltrane, Art Tatum, Louis Armstrong, and more. (I have jazz playlists on Spotify if you're interested.)

I am committed that all children have the possibility and opportunity of creating and improvising in music as naturally as we create and improvise using our native language.

So how do we get there?

Stages of music development in babies and young children.

[Slide 3 - audio]

absorption

random responses

purposeful responses

imitation - recognizing difference between their response and the “right”  
one

assimilation - recognizing and correcting problems by using the breath and  
movement

Music and language vocabularies - See slide #4.

Music learning is quite similar to the process of language learning. Children absorb language, make noises, learn to babble, begin to think and make sense, and then create and improvise.

A baby's experiences in the womb: taste, light, touch, SOUND.

Just to name one study, Mampe, Friederici, Christophe, and Wermke (2009) suggested that day-old infants cry in the tonal language of their native tongue. French babies’ cries tended to go up toward the end and German babies’ cries tended to go down. If this is the case, how would they have learned to do that? By listening to the more typical rises and falls of their native language while in the womb, right? Also, a newborn prefers the voice of his mother over another woman with similar intonation.

Many studies point to the same conclusion—that aural learning with its accompanying neural brain development—is happening certainly in the last trimester in utero, if not before.

The sound environment is exceptionally rich in utero and continues to be crucial for the first two years of life when there is a critical window for children to experience sound (music and language)

Especially important are one-on-one interactions with another child or adult, in a natural playful nurturing creative musical environment, with or without instruments, not so much using CDs or the radio, not that recorded music isn't valuable, but you would not learn German or Mandarin or Spanish only by listening to CDs of someone speaking in those languages.

It's actually a little bit absurd to think that we can learn language without another person who will interact with us in real time modeling the behaviors of speaking, social connection, including eye contact, movement, and very importantly, the context in which these conversations are happening.

I think you would agree with me that you can't learn a language from listening to a recording of someone speaking in that language—and certainly not as inattentively as we often do with music recordings. (Simply having on background music is almost meaningless to most children.) Even if we *are* attentive to music recordings and engaged in moving, singing, or chanting along with them (which is absolutely great, I did it with my daughter a lot), we are still missing a crucial piece that is all but neglected in the early childhood music community: one-on-one musical interactions that allow children to explore with adult guidance (preferably from a early childhood music professional or even a fine musician) what it is to BE musical. This is what they need to develop their full musical potential.

In a world that I can envision, early learning centers should have long stretches of time 15 to 20 minutes, even longer, every day, twice a day, in which you do not speak, but rather sing, dance, play musically, move, chant rhythmically, be expressive.

Just be musical around children as a natural way of being. This could seem confronting to some of you or confronting to some of your teachers, but simple intimate interactions are essential in a child's music development. Again, this is quite parallel to language development.

What is most beneficial in these interactions is that a child gets a large diet of listening vocabulary? The larger, the better. Don't ever stop experiencing more and more different types and styles and cultures of music. Expand listening vocabularies forever.

Children learn from differences, not from sameness. You would not hold back teaching a child red blue and green until after they had mastered black white and gray. Would you? Of course not. In fact they experience so many colors all day once their cones are ready to take in the array of visible light. Likewise, it makes no sense if you live in a bilingual family to withhold one language while the other one is being fully developed, and then to present the new language afterwards. I believe children can handle far more than we think.

So let me help you understand everything there is to know about music.

[See slides 12, 13, 14 and hear musical examples]

Helpful hints for singing for children: Use a light singing voice in a higher register than you normally sing in. Keep your songs above the D above middle C only occasionally dropping below if necessary. This helps children to sing in their singing voices rather than use the voice they use for speaking. A pitch pipe or tuning fork tuned to D can be very helpful.

Dance expressively and move for children. Rocking and bouncing are excellent. Do not to manipulate the child's limbs, that is, forcing them to clap or kick because you are moving their muscles for them. Try to let them be reacting to music by moving however it is they are moving, or not moving. Your job is to model for them what it is to be musical by moving. Dance, be silly, use weight (heavy and light), use space (large and small, front and back, left and right, tight and wide)—all of these elements in every combination that makes sense to you. Show quickly moving and slowly moving, bound flow or relaxed flow. And preferably always using continuous fluid movement all while using the elements just described. The key is to just be expressive, overly so, with exaggerated but controlled movement, using your hips and your shoulders especially, where the weight resides in your body. Doing all this takes some practice and would benefit greatly from professional guidance, perhaps a day-long workshop, and if you can, a well-trained

early childhood music specialist. Plug: You're certainly welcome to be in touch with me depending upon your interest in furthering the musical development of some of your faculty. It can be a little bit confronting, but the children deserve to get their musical brains wired early and often through human musical interactions. Again, this is almost precisely the way they learn to be expert creators and improvisers in language.

How can we infer about the readiness for language and music learning from newborn behaviors? I'd like to recommend a book that I really enjoyed reading. There are several interesting research studies that illuminate how we come to know the inside of a child's mind before they are able to formally communicate. I encourage you to read it if you haven't. I learned quite a bit of how researchers study infant behaviors.

Book: *How Babies Think* by Gopnik, Meltzoff, and Kuhl.

<http://www.amazon.co.uk/How-Babies-Think-Science-Childhood/dp/075381417X>

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Music to move to:

Dr. Eric's playlists on Spotify  
[www.bit.ly/DrEric1](http://www.bit.ly/DrEric1)  
[www.bit.ly/DrEric2](http://www.bit.ly/DrEric2), 3, 4, 5

## BONUS:

[Rant]

Over the years, I've observed that the work I did in 1st grade is now more the norm in PreK! Unacceptable. We haven't evolved into a different, faster-learning, species in less than 50 years. Young children need to be read to, and have unstructured conversations one on one, not taught to sit still and make letters, and many other developmentally inappropriate things they are NOT ready for! What are we hurrying for? What's wrong with where they are? That is where they are, you know. Right there. There. Let's let them be, and provide them with more experiences that feed the roots of their learning, and not take the shortcuts that may create a few flowers only in the short run—using the proper cultivation and the care to provide a rich and playful environment, the flowers will blossom. As early childhood specialists, we really do need to stand up to policies of some educational programs in which the curriculum is not sensitive to, and does not account for, the individual needs of students at very diverse levels of readinesses for a multitude of important skills. I'm very sad about what I've been reading about and seeing in the school and hope that the educational climate will shift so that it will better honor and benefit the students who attend typical public school environments. Public policy has done immeasurable damage to the futures of many. Let's do what we can do protect "learning as play" in the classroom, at least up through Kindergarten. The national standards are in need of some serious scrutiny. Where's Teaberry Brazleton when you need him?

[rant over]