



Playing for keeps

Sarah Giles looks at how mucking around with music could be the key to brain development

A musician works with a group of pre-school children at a Sure Start nursery, teaching rhythm, pitch, and self-expression. After the session, he writes, 'One particular child started to sing her own tune, over the top of the tune myself and the other children were singing ... She explained she was singing a song about muffins.'

Photos: courtesy of Youth Music

What happens when pre-school-age children engage with music? A project by researchers at Northumbria University for the charity Youth Music suggests that the practice of musical activities with under-fives is not only great for their musical abilities but speeds up the development of a number of other skills.

Named *Turning their ears on – keeping their ears open*, the study took place in North Tyneside and Great Yarmouth in a total of 10 settings, with the involvement of more than 400 children aged up to five years old. The researchers used parents' and teachers' reflective diaries, along with interviews, questionnaires, and observations. The

children were profiled on entry and exit from the programme.

The aims of the research were to find out how music can help to prepare children for primary school; to test to see if skills in numeracy and literacy of pre-school age children are improved because of music-making activities; to collect data relating to the training for the musicians and Early Years Workers (EYWs) and to look at the sustainability of the work once the musicians withdrew from the research settings.

Children who participated in weekly sessions with a musician were found to develop more



rapidly than expected in communication, mathematical and musical skills, as well as developing emotionally, socially, physically and acquiring an increased sense of self.

Researchers Jim Clark, head of the academic division of Pre and School Learning, and Helen Taylor, head of Initial Teacher Education, claim that this type of music experience supports development in communication, language skills and understanding. 'From the findings we have concluded the regular weekly or bi-weekly contact over a two-year period between a musician and young children (0-5) does impact on several areas of these children's development,' they report.

The study highlights these key benefits of musical playfulness:

- increasing amount and quality of speech developed through singing activities
- increased vocabulary (through learning the words to songs)
- development of understanding of rhyming through singing
- increased ability to listen and respond to spoken instructions in connection with a musical activity
- learning how conversation works through 'call and response' activities
- development of greater control of their voices through learning to pitch notes – high and low – and pitch match (sing in tune)
- increased ability to tell their own stories through creating their own songs.

It is active participation in music-making, rather than simply passive listening, which makes the difference, the researchers conclude. It is a completely different quality of experience and engagement. 'A music session should involve the children most of the time, not be a performance by the musician,' explains Taylor.

Language-related skills were one area where the effects of music were noted. The research suggests, 'Children of this age group seem to



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find it easier to remember long strings of words, phrases and sentences when they are "attached" to a tune.' They also 'love to change the words of well-known songs for fun'. In one activity, the children were encouraged to delight in rhyming words, shouting out the final word of each line as it rhymed with the one before, and laughing.

In the monitoring of the children's numerical skills, the children were observed to be using the songs ('speckled frogs', 'green bottles', etc) to help them count. Parents reported that this was also happening at home. One researcher observed: 'Children are playing *Five Fat Sausages* with M (musician) and EYW. M is

singing the song and EYW has blocks as the sausages and in between each verse she is asking the children how many left now and they are counting up the ones that are left. When the song is finished four of the children start it up on their own and they are copying exactly what M and the EYW were doing with them – even doing the "how many left?" in between the verses.'

Perhaps more surprisingly, the research also suggests that carers attending the groups with their children improved their parenting skills. Parents reported an increase in interaction with their children, and their increased confidence was also evident to the researchers. Jim Clark comments, 'Many of the parents involved in the groups were young or new parents, who perhaps weren't as skilled



as they would like to be. The structured environment provided a setting for interaction with the children.'

'It is too early yet to know how the research findings will be more widely applied,' explains Clark, 'but the centres where we carried out the research are looking into ways of allowing the work with musicians to continue because they have seen the benefits.' ■

Further details of the research can be found at www.bongoclub.org.uk/practitioners