

Value for Learning and Living

Insights on the value of music and steady beat

by Phyllis S. Weikart



The thrill of hearing a mother's singing, the joy of moving to music played by an older sibling, the awareness of sounds around the play yard, and the growing ability to tell who or what is creating these pleasurable experiences all encourage young children to be involved in the world around them.

Such involvement is a fundamental condition of life, for the child, for the parent, for success in life. When children are born, they thrive only if certain experiences are continually available, including sufficient light, sound, nourishment, and human touch. To respond to these stimuli, the infant comes equipped

with many reflexes, such as an eye-blink response, the ability to suck, and the ability to hear and orient toward sounds.

Beyond a collection of universal basic responses, however, all else must be learned: how to walk, how to talk and in what language, how to use numbers, how to solve problems, and all the skills and knowledge that a child must acquire to be a successful, contributing member of family and community.

Most adults understand the need to give children time and experience to experience growth. They have watched brothers and sisters grow, they have seen neighborhood children develop, and they have observed their own children with excitement and pride. Though adults generally realize that children need both opportunity and support, when it comes to understanding the developmental pattern of music and steady beat, many adults seem to believe that such skill happens automatically.

In an international study by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, about 2,000 teachers and 5,000

parents in 15 countries were asked about the importance of general physical development for the preschool child, including developing steady beat competence (Weikart, 1999). Both groups thought that it was an area of modest importance but that no teaching was necessary for it to occur.

But listen to some adults when they try to sing. Could these adults pitch songs for children? Would they know if a child was on pitch? Watch some of them attempt to dance. Could these adults label the movements they are doing? Would they know if a child was labeling them correctly?

It would seem that development of these abilities to a comfortable and cognitive level of competence is *not* automatic; many adults have difficulty with singing and steady beat. Such skills are not that difficult to learn for persons of any age, but developing a sufficient level of competence requires support from knowledgeable adults and plenty of opportunities for active engagement in targeted learning experiences.

Indeed, it is relatively easy to help young children develop a basic level of

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skill in music and steady beat competence. Children want to sing and they demand to be active, making most action songs and singing games popular events in early childhood settings. Although most preschool teachers include group movement and music activities in their programs (usually at circle or large-group time) because they are enjoyable, it is important to understand that such activities also contribute to many aspects of children's overall development.

Standardized testing shows that children with steady beat independence are better readers and more successful in mathematics. Further, teachers report that children with better abilities in steady beat are more well behaved in class and have less aggressive physical contact with other students. Steady beat seems to help in these areas because it contributes to children's ability to concentrate, to understand space and distance, and to have better control of physical movements.

So how do we help children become more skilled in music and steady beat? Children learn by exploring, sharing, imitating, describing, comparing, contrasting, and applying. They learn by planning their action and by reflecting on that action to take it to a conscious verbal level. As adults we often tire of the same action song. We may naturally resent it when a child requests that the group skip again, when we would rather engage in a new movement. However, we must recognize that repetition is an essential component for building basic skills. Repetition builds understanding. We need to encourage children to talk about what they are going to do — for example, to describe how they plan to move from their cleanup tasks to the circle-time area.

Once they get where they are going, we need to encourage children to reflect on how they moved there. At first, we may

have to provide children with the language for such descriptions. Over time they will be able to use their own words to describe and reflect on their actions and experiences. In addition to doing the actual movement, using descriptive language helps children build an understanding of how their bodies move and how they can control these movements.

Singing in the Classroom

Musical experiences and steady beat need to be planned with children's level of sensitivity to music kept in mind. An important feature is for the classroom adult's voice to be the singing voice children hear. Contrast the known adult's singing voice with a voice heard on a recording. The adult on the recording is not present, may be of the opposite sex than the classroom adult, or may be singing too fast for the children to comprehend the words and melody. Part of the learning that occurs in music comes from the emotional connection the child has formed with the adult, and because a recording is abstract for the young child, the real heart and soul of the music is lost.

Many adults prefer to use recordings because they "don't sing." Often their lack of confidence is the result of criticism from an adult or peer early in their own life. With a little practice before introducing a song in the classroom, most adults are able to sing it well enough to learn along with the children. One issue all adults face is the fact that children have very short vocal chords, making their voices higher than an adult's. To accommodate this, classroom adults need to sing at a higher pitch than might at first be comfortable. With practice this will feel more natural, and the children will be happy to have us sing along with them.

Preschool teachers use action songs and singing games for a variety of reasons: children greatly enjoy them, they allow

children to get up and be active, and they are something the whole group can do together. Though these are all good reasons for promoting these activities, such songs and games also involve patterns of movements that aid children's coordination. The value of such group movement experiences can be enhanced when adults adopt the following strategies:

- Begin a movement first and then add the song. For example, move arms back and forth slowly before singing "The **w**ipers on the **b**us go **swish**, swish, **swish**." Note the movement on only the first and third "swish" for steady beat, not on all three words. Although the arm movements usually accompany each "swish," this is the *rhythm* of those words, not the steady beat.
- Help children explore their singing voices by having singing conversations. These conversations use random pitches, not exact songs. Have a singing conversation during snack time. Instead of talking with the children, sing those same words using any tune randomly. Encourage them to sing back and to other children.
- To help children learn to sing in tune, sing simple songs with them that do not have too many pitches. Examples include "Star Light, Star Bright," "Hot Cross Buns," "It's Raining, It's Pouring," and nursery rhymes sung with two pitches. For example, sing "Peas Porridge" using only two different pitches throughout.

Steady Beat in the Classroom

An important concept underlying success in music is steady beat — what some people refer to as rhythm. Steady beat is the consistent, repetitive pulse within every rhyme, song, and piece of music. Steady beat is *felt*, not seen or

heard. It is the rocking beat that a parent or caregiver uses when singing a lullaby to an infant. This same rocking beat tempo can be used when interacting with children of all ages.

Steady beat is an organizer for the child, purposeful and calming. The research carried out by High/Scope Educational Research Foundation (*Timing in Child Development*, Kuhlman & Schweinhart, 1999) shows a positive correlation of steady beat to reading, vocabulary, math, music, and physical coordination.

It is known that a person who stutters does not do so when singing or using steady beat while speaking. In a workshop I was presenting, an adult told me she could never answer a question posed to her by her teacher because she stuttered so badly. She figured out her own solution. When the teacher began to ask a question of the class, this student began a steady beat movement on the side of her leg. If called on, she could answer without stuttering.

The BBC News reported a research study from England conducted by University College, London. The article was titled "Poor rhythm 'at heart of dyslexia'" (Education Tuesday, 23 July 2002). Dyslexia is a permanent disorder that affects the way a person understands, processes, "takes in," retains, recalls, and/or expresses information. Scientists believe that a poor sense of rhythm could be the cause of dyslexia. "Researchers concluded that an awareness of beats can influence the way young children assimilate speech patterns, which may in turn affect their reading and writing abilities." These examples underscore the importance of steady beat in helping children make sense of their world and organize their responses.

Although steady beat is not a difficult concept, its development does require

thoughtful planning and application in the early childhood classroom. Following are some of the essential components to support children's development of steady beat:

- Begin a movement, such as patting the beat on the knees or some other body part. Then chant a single word to the beat, such as the name of a body part, a child's name, or a word that is difficult to pronounce (pat on the accented syllable).

- Begin rhymes with a steady beat movement; this provides an opportunity for children to organize the words into a flow of speech.

In the following rhyme spoken naturally, the beat is in bold. If the word has more than one syllable, the accented syllable is in bold.

Jack be nimble, **Jack** be quick.
Jack jump over the **can**dlestick.

- Steady beat also can be marched by children as they alternate their feet at a faster tempo than the rocking/patting beat. The relationship is two marching steps to one rock/pat:

MARCH MARCH MARCH MARCH
 PAT PAT
 ROCK ROCK

Conclusion

Music and steady beat experiences for children and adults at any age are known to be effective and have a broad influence on behavior. However, these skills do not develop without opportunity for extended experience; and they are too important to children and adults to be left to chance. As an early childhood educator, you can seize the opportunity to help young children develop these competencies by providing music and steady beat experiences

as regular features of your program. Not only will this help children with singing and coordination, it will also enhance many other areas of their development.

Remember: A beginner is a beginner at any age! Yet, early childhood is a perfect time for young children to develop music and steady beat competence.

References

BBC News Education. (Tuesday, 23 July, 2002). "Poor Rhythm 'at heart of dyslexia'." pg. 1.

www.highscope.org/Research/TimingPaper/timing_study.htm

Weikart, D. P. (1999). *What Should Young Children Learn? Teacher and Parent Views in 15 Countries*. Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

Buyer's Guide to Music and Rhythm

This directory is a partial listing of companies providing music and rhythm products and services. Inclusion does not imply endorsement by *Child Care Information Exchange*. To request free information from these companies, visit www.ChildCareExchange.com or circle the number for each company of interest on the Product Inquiry Card located between pages 72 and 73.

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