Make Time for Music!



If children are introduced to music at the beginning of their lives it can offer comfort, enjoyment and a wealth of creative opportunities. In this special article, the talented singer and musician Hilary James, offers some great ideas on how to give your children the musical start they deserve.

Singing to a baby or for that matter, to anyone else, or even just for our own pleasure, is surely one of the most basic of human instincts. Sadly, it's an instinct that seems to have been suppressed in our supposedly 'advanced' society conditioned to being spoon-fed its music from CDs, iPods or the radio.

As wonderful as all the technology is, private and social music making has been in decline for many years. Three hundred years ago we would be lucky to hear Paganini play the violin once in our lifetime, now we can turn on the radio and hear the world's finest classical musicians whenever we like.

For many years our popular music has been so massaged by studio trickery that it is impossible for amateurs to reproduce. The pub piano has disappeared. Our own traditional songs, once truly the music of the masses, have been relegated to a few devotees meeting in the backrooms of pubs. The cumulative result is that we now think that music is something done by 'others', not by 'us'. Some of us have never even sung in the shower, and even feel an embarrassment at humming to our own baby at bedtime. What a huge shame!

The basic building blocks of music – pitch and rhythm, offer a fundamental means of communication, even bonding with a child, and if we are to believe much recent research, pave the way for a child's broad intellectual development more than any other discipline. So in this article I'll not only discuss recorded music but encourage you to throw any embarrassment to the wind and make your own music with your child, no matter how badly you THINK you do it!

Lullabies and nursery rhymes are the obvious starting point, but if you can't think what to sing or just haven't the confidence (yet) try humming. It can be any tune that comes into your head or even random notes, it really doesn't matter; you'll enjoy exploring the gentle sounds you can make (yes you CAN make lovely sounds) to delight your baby.

Play recorded music as a backdrop to certain points in the day; the routine itself is comforting. Lullabies and classical music for naptimes are good.

If you have an MP3 player, try creating a playlist of, say, the slow movements of some Mozart symphonies interspersed with gentle classical guitar pieces (the very young respond well to plucked strings). For bathtime, you can choose something more lively.

If you use the radio, do so selectively. There's a good variety of stations on FM and AM and of course a myriad on the Internet. It's good to expose children to all sorts of different musical styles from the start, but be wary of just turning the radio on randomly as a pacifier and effectively allowing a stranger to choose the music for your baby. Stay in control!

Combining words & actions

Make up a soundtrack to your day by singing about what's happening:

- "Mmm! Mmm! open wide... here comes dinner, here comes dinner... "
- Tap out your baby's name with spoons at lunchtime and think about the rhythm the syllables make, for example: He-le-na Smith or Tom-my John-son. Do they have friends with names with similar rhythms? Chris-to-pher Bloggs or Pol-ly Per-kins.
- Try thinking about the rhythm of other words you use together and tap them out. Food is always a good starting point. Here, for example, are some foods whose words all have the same rhythm: Straw-ber-ries, rasp-ber-ries, broc-co-li, car-rot cake and in another rhythm: fish pie, brown bread, pea soup, sand-wich, jam sponge.

If you'd like to expand your repertoire of rhymes and songs, the Internet contains a treasure trove on all sorts of subjects. I've put together a selection of favourites at www.childrensmusic.co.uk

Some songs and games have actions that make them memorable and fun. 'Simon Says' is a good example, but why not try putting your own actions to songs to make them special between you and your child?

Homemade Instruments

You can make simple instruments to accompany your songs from supplies in the kitchen!

- Drums from food containers with wooden spoons for drum sticks. Use plastic boxes for a restrained session or cake tins if you don't mind a riot!
- Cymbals from saucepan lids... if you're feeling really brave!
- Shakers from plastic bottles filled with lentils, beans or sugar to give different sounds. Make sure the tops are on tight and don't tell the children not to unscrew them, or they will!
- Spoons from...spoons! Yes spoons are a percussion instrument in their own right – turn a couple back-to-back and clack them together like castanets. I saw a busker a few years ago who was a true virtuoso. His mum probably started him early!
- If you're using old things rather than your finest kitchen accessories, you can also get the paints out and have great fun decorating some of these instruments.





At what age should my child start to play an instrument?

If children have been exposed to music from birth through any, or all of the ideas mentioned earlier, they'll tell you when they want to play an instrument and which ones fire the imagination. Mozart began playing the piano at three years of age. I have a friend who started to play the violin in his late teens and an uncle who took up the bagpipes in his forties. There are no hard and fast rules, and sometimes the first instrument you try may not be the one that suits you best, so beware of being too pushy if your child is obviously not inspired. Only a tiny minority will become world class virtuosos, but playing something to whatever level is the important thing. Enthusiasm is key! You can of course learn together. If there's an instrument you've always fancied playing this is your chance to try.

Strings

The ukulele is an ideal instrument for a young child. It's small and cheap, and the four strings, which are very soft to press down, are fingered in a similar way to the top four strings of a guitar, so it's a good stepping stone if you want to change to a guitar later.

The Guitar

A bit trickier to play than a ukulele, but because it's by far the most popular instrument, your child won't have to look far for inspiration. Small guitars for young beginners are of far better quality than when we were young. If your child is starting lessons, the teacher will advise what to get, otherwise try to find a guitarist friend or neighbour to be with you when you buy.

The Violin

Although the violin is a small instrument to begin with, it is still available in a variety of sizes for children, even down to 1/16th of a normal 'adult' instrument, so there's no excuse for not starting early.

It has to be acknowledged however, that more than any other instrument, a violin is hard to listen to when played by a beginner, but when played well, it's surely the most exciting and emotional of all. So just think of the huge satisfaction you'll get when your little one turns out to be the Heifetz of the 21st century!

The Recorder & Tin Whistle

Traditionally, the recorder has always been the starter wind instrument played by children. It has a bit of a bad reputation because of this, which is a shame, because if you've ever heard it played really well, you'll know how beautiful it can sound (try seeking out Vivaldi's recorder concerto and be prepared to be amazed!).

The tin whistle is something really worth considering as an alternative. It's cheap, simpler to finger than a recorder and has a distinctively different, 'breathier' tone. There are some wonderful players to inspire, mostly from the field of traditional music, but jazz too.

The Piano or Keyboard

Incredibly versatile and, because it's polyphonic (you play more than one note at once), gives the child an understanding of harmony as well as melody. A piano is not so hard on the ear as a recorder or violin, but with modern keyboards it's easy to practice on headphones.





Going to Concerts

It's wonderful to be able to introduce children to live music, and the sooner the better. The experience of seeing, as well as hearing musicians play, is exciting at any age. We all know that rock 'n' roll is loud, but the volume of a symphony orchestra in full flight can be surprising if you've not experienced it before. The shapes, the sounds and the emotion of the event can make a huge impact on a small child and trigger a lifelong love. However, a plea – if your child starts to make a disturbance please take them outside. It's hard to walk out of a concert, especially if you've invested money in tickets, but this is a gradual learning process. It takes time. Some children are naturally passive listeners, others show their enthusiasm more vocally (and mid-song!) which is good for them, but difficult for all the other children. Don't be embarrassed. Your child is just being a child and learning to listen!

Hilary James and Simon Mayor have worked as presenters, songwriters and musical directors for BBC TV and Schools Radio programmes. As well as touring the world playing concerts and festivals they have over 20 years experience of visits to schools, performing to pupils of all ages. They have an excellent range of musical resources for parents, teachers and children available on their website: www.childrensmusic.co.uk

