

# Music through the curriculum

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Kathryn Yarrow is an early childhood teacher who has shared the joy of music making with young children for over 20 years. She has worked as a do-re-mi music teacher for 15 years and has taught private piano students for over 23 years. Kathryn has also taught early childhood music classes at Griffith University Young Conservatorium and in local childcare centres. She has just completed her Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) to deepen her knowledge of early childhood development and practice and to embark on new teaching adventures.

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*Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul. (Friedrich Froebel)*

As early childhood educators, offering the children in our care rich learning experiences through play is accepted as the foundation of teaching. Likewise, most teachers agree on the value of using music in early childhood education. But what does this mean? Is it enough to play your favourite 'Hits for Kids' CD as background noise? Or to slot in a few favourite YouTube nursery rhymes on the interactive whiteboard each afternoon as the children put their shoes on and prepare for home? While there is nothing wrong with using music in these ways in the early childhood setting, if this is the only music that the children are experiencing then are they missing out. Music and learning experiences have been linked from the beginning of time.

*Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination and life to everything (Plato)*

### **Music uses and develops both sides of the brain**

Music and language development are intrinsically linked as music and speech share many common elements. For example, the separation of words into individual sounds

convey emotional meaning while the rhythmic structure of language, including stress and intonation, correlate with beat or pulse, rhythm and pitch in music. The rhythm of a melody is the pattern of the words.

*Singing helps to build a vocabulary of sounds and use of a child's own voice is one of the most powerful instruments of learning.*

Music uses and develops both sides of the brain. Neuro-imaging has shown that music involves more than just centralised hot spots in the brain, occupying large swathes on both sides (Goddard Blythe 2011).

Choosing the best repertoire to use throughout the day with young children can be problematic. There is no shortage of children's songs, rhymes and singing games, but how do we know what is best for the child? Some educators are guided by the children's choice of favourite songs. However, it can be a dangerous concept to think that what they like is good for them. Taking a young child grocery shopping with you proves this point!

*Children like and imitate anything and everything – for their ability to choose has not yet developed. They will prefer music which surrounds them, which they get to hear (Forrai 2005).*

Internationally renowned music educator, Dr John Feierabend warns that the cherished traditional songs and rhymes are gradually being forgotten and are being supplanted by market driven 'ear candy', tunes that may provide a temporary rush, but exist mostly to help sell this year's new toy or trend (Feierabend 2000).

Using traditional rhymes and songs is important for young children as they contain the 'signature' melodies and inflections of the mother tongue of the culture, preparing the ear, the voice and brain for speech. In Australia, we have inherited a variety of traditions from across the globe.

*In the same way that an educator chooses quality literature for young children, choose songs and rhymes that are musical, playful, engage the imagination, encompass actions and movement and are rich in language.*

When singing to and with your students, remember to start the melody at a pitch that is comfortable for the child – not the pitch that is comfortable for you. Young children's vocal chords are much shorter than an adults – hence they have higher speaking and singing voices. Often adults sing at a pitch that is far too low for a child and this will result (over time) in producing a class of 'droners' – children who sing so low, there is no noticeable rise and fall in their melody. It has been suggested to start songs mostly around the pitches of F-A. A set of small chime bars, use of a recorder or tuning fork can help with this.

### **Singing teaches more than music**

So what does using music throughout the curriculum look like? For a teacher in the child care centre, it might mean engaging a young child in a rhyme or song while changing a nappy (eg *Peek a boo, Shoe a little horse*), bouncing them on your knee (eg *Jack be nimble*), or singing a song to bring calm at rest time (eg *Twinkle Twinkle*). The kindy teacher may use songs to gather children (eg *Come on*

*everyone*), to move children from one activity to the next (eg *Five little buns in a baker's shop*), to gain attention (eg *A ram sam sam*) and to incorporate early literacy and numeracy experiences throughout the day (eg *Ten galloping horses, Here is the beehive, 12345 once I caught a fish alive*). The teacher in the school classroom might incorporate these as well as use singing to teach positional language in maths (Prep/Gr1; eg *Circle to the left, Old brass wagon, When I was one*), to teach science (eg *Birdie birdie where is your nest, Five green and speckled frogs*), to introduce a literacy unit (sing the story *Where is the green sheep by Mem Fox*) and to help children walk together in a line (eg *Walk and stop*).

There will, hopefully, still be an explicit music time during each day in which the children can explore ways to move, express themselves as they experience high/low, fast/slow, loud/quiet, use percussion instruments, puppets and enjoy singing games. Always remember that singing is an important tool in the development of young children. It teaches more than music alone – listening, cooperation, taking turns, language skills, vocabulary, self-expression, internal thinking, diction, sequencing and structure and communication.

*Music makes us happier by causing endorphins to flow, to breathe correctly and to enhance our brain function. It also teaches discipline, self-control and in a group gives a sense of being part of a whole creative togetherness, which is fundamental to the wellbeing of the human spirit (Goddard Blythe 2011).*

### **References**

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- Feierabend, JM 2000, *The book of bounces*, GIA First Steps, USA.
- Forrai, K 2005, *Preschool Music Education in the Spirit of Zoltán Kodály*, Australian Kodaly Bulletin, KMEIA, Australia.