

# Give voice

Communication, language and music are intrinsically linked, and it is important to understand this in the early years, writes *Linda Pound*

**R**esearchers from a wide range of disciplines – psychologists, musicologists, anthropologists, archaeologists and linguists – are in broad agreement about the important role of music in communication.

Professor Colwyn Trevarthen, working with colleague Stephen Malloch, following a lifetime researching communication between babies and their carers, argues that ‘our infinite varieties of communication, including spoken and written language, are all given life by our innate communicative musicality’.

## LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING

From our earliest days, musical elements are used to draw babies into communication with those around them (see box, overleaf). By changing the pitch and rhythms of everyday language, adults capture the attention of newborn babies and over time they use musical elements to highlight particular words or phrases.

The ‘tunes’ or intonations used convey meaning to the infant listener and the two-way process that develops between adult and child

creates non-verbal understandings. Steven Mithen refers to this as a ‘pre-linguistic, musical’ mode of thought and action, which he believes to have developed during the evolution of human language. He further claims that music is ‘critical to the cognitive development of the child’.

## Gaining an insight

For babies as well as for children with communication difficulties, musical interactions, whether sung or vocalised, give insight into vital aspects of language use such as turn-taking, the pattern of phrases, the range of pitches and the variety of rhythms used.

While for children learning English for the first time much of this will not be new, songs give them the opportunity to wallow in the sounds and vocabulary of English, without the stress of having to understand fully and respond appropriately. Songs personalised with the names of individual children draw children into the singing, focusing their attention.

## SINGING AND TALKING

Singing is playful and songs, like other forms of play, enable children to rehearse or practise spoken language, much more than would be the case if



## ABOUT THIS SERIES

This eight-part series will explore how music:

- aids early learning and development
- can support learning across all areas of the EYFS
- promotes the Characteristics of Effective Learning.

The series will also identify ways in which adults who lack confidence in their own musical ability or competence can become more confident.

- For the first three articles in the series, see ‘Tuned in’, ‘Move it’ and ‘In the mood’, all at: [www.nurseryworld.co.uk](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk)



Nicola Burke (right) is an early years

we relied on rote practice. Children can often sing words and phrases that they are not yet ready or able to use in everyday speech. Those with communication difficulties may also use words and phrases which they would normally be unable to voice and can often join in on cue when singing, even if not in speaking.

For all children, including those new to learning English, the function of musical elements to support memory means that words and phrases that are sung are more likely to be retained than those that are simply spoken.

Storytelling can include music, chants and song, and this gives young children the chance to contribute to the parts that they know, and to extend their enjoyment and understanding of the text. (This will be explored further in the next article in this series.)

## Musical experiences

Musical experiences, live and recorded, give children a great deal to talk about. The stimulation of seeing and hearing drummers or bagpipers, percussion group Stomp or even their



Children can often sing words that they can't use in everyday speech



music specialist involved in Creative Futures' Music for Change initiative

older brothers and sisters playing the recorder can promote discussion and description.

Children hear recorded music for much of their lives, but hearing a wide range of music can broaden their understanding of the communicative nature of music.

### Range of equipment

Equipment for children to use independently needs to be reliable, sturdy and simple to operate. Although headphones are useful, the shared experience of group listening supports communication. If you have access to an interactive whiteboard or laptop, DVDs allow children to see how sounds are made, to imitate the physical actions that musicians make and to explore the full range of communicative strategies being used by the performers. Over-use of recorded music can act as a barrier to listening, as children switch off and learn not to listen. It can also act as a barrier to conversation.

### Describing sounds

Getting children to describe particular sounds or to make up words

which mimic sounds develops their use of spoken language. Most will be familiar with pitter-patter raindrops, but what about the sound of the sea or traffic rushing by? Children who speak languages other than English will often have ideas drawn from their home language. What do French dogs or Chinese cats, for example, say? Exploring onomatopoeic vocabulary and singing songs in other languages heightens all children's metalinguistic awareness or understanding of how language works.

### Exploring many elements of music

The ways in which musical elements contribute to speech are often underestimated. Young children have to learn to control the voice, control its pitch, speed, loudness and rhythms of speech. All of this requires a great deal of practice and exploration. Using different pitches and rhythms, making vocalisations quiet or loud, producing long or short sounds will enable children to understand that inflection and rhythm in language make a difference to how well they are understood.

## RECORDING TIPS

### Recording music to promote communication

Recording children's musical play gives children and adults instant access to the sounds and rhythmic movements through which they are communicating their ideas. Issues to consider include:

- A range of handheld voice recorders are available, but digital cameras, MP3 players, video cameras and mobile phones can also be used to give children instant replay of their musical and vocal explorations. The advantage of microphone-shaped recorders is that children can grip them easily and know where to direct their voice.
- Sophisticated software such as sequencers are available cheaply and the effects produced are interesting for children. However, like with a great deal of technology, children have no way of understanding how the effects are produced. They may be entertaining but are not always communicative and should be used sparingly.
- Video recordings of children's music-making give children opportunities to think critically about what they have done. They may also be used in conjunction with sound recordings to add further sounds or movements. Communicating with others and thinking about what can make recordings more interesting can support sustained, shared thinking in older children.



### MORE INFORMATION

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### SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S COMMUNICATION

Communication is much more than listening and speaking. It requires meaningful responses. Musical conversations are one way in which adults can support children, particularly those who have communication difficulties, to understand that process.

Musical conversations are essentially what goes on between tiny babies and the adults who care for them. The baby, playing with their first toy – the voice – makes a sound which adults copy. The baby responds and the adult responds again – often varying the sound a little. Perhaps the sound is repeated at a higher or lower pitch, perhaps it is repeated more quickly or more slowly, and the variation can help to maintain the baby's (and adult's) interest.

### Two-way process

A similar technique is used in music therapy – children experiencing communication difficulties choose and play instruments, and therapists mirror the sounds they make. This serves to draw the child's attention to the sounds themselves and promote the idea of a two-way process. This idea can readily be used in musical interactions with children and can encourage perseverance. It also signals adults' interest in children's ➤

music-making that is often lacking. Susan Young describes an extension of this process, suggesting that adults may imitate sounds or movements made by children and that this starting point can lead to the co-construction of musical ideas.

### Collaboration

Activities of this sort underline the fact that music and conversation are social activities – benefiting from collaboration. Group singing is very useful for this since it allows children to be part of the action even though they may not yet know all the words or actions. They can just join in with the bits they know – belonging to the group, learning socially and learning to be social.

Knowing a wide range of songs means that adults can introduce songs that match with children's interests. The recordings provided with some songbooks are generally intended to help adults learn new songs but are often pitched too high for young children to sing along with.



So try listening to them in the car or while you do the ironing!

Finally, but not unimportantly, practitioners can make parents aware of the importance of musical activity in the development of communication and language. Some parents may be unaware of the vital role that they have to play in introducing

**Like conversation, music is a social, collaborative activity**

children to the world of communication around them. ■

*The photographs were taken at Mary Paterson Nursery School, west London, one of the settings taking part in the Music for Change programme initiated and led by charity Creative Futures ([www.creativefuturesuk.com](http://www.creativefuturesuk.com)).*

## MUSIC AND BABIES

Singing preceded spoken language in human development, as it does in babies. Steven Mithen, a professor of prehistory, reminds us 'music has a developmental... priority over language' and is the means by which we communicate with babies from their earliest days.

Mithen uses a quotation from Colwyn Trevarthen which beautifully describes the way in which music in all its forms shapes communication between mothers and babies, 'A mother greets her newborn in ecstatic cues with falling pitch, and by gentle fondling. She is unable to keep her eyes from the baby's face. She touches hands, face, body with rhythmic care, and holds the infant close to her so they can join attention and greet one another.

'Her speech is a kind of singing, with high gliding gestures of pitch and repetition of regular gentle phrases on a graceful beat, leaving places for the infant to join in with coos, smiles and gestures of the hands and whole body. Every move of the baby elicits a reaction from her. These exchanges are intricately co-ordinated with a subdued choreography that brings out matching rhythms and phrasing in mother and infant.'

### Baby talk

Baby talk is frowned on by some people but may be better understood if termed 'motherese' or 'infant-directed speech'

(IDS). IDS may not have been intended to but does actually reflect the fact that early motherese comes not only from the mother (or other adults) but from adults copying the infant. Thus talk may be directed to the child as well as being influenced by the child.

The characteristics of IDS are that we raise the pitch of our voices; we use a much wider range of pitch than we would in everyday speech; we lengthen the vowels, use more pauses, shorter phrases and a great deal of repetition. These features are easily mocked – just about everyone does it intuitively, even young children wishing to communicate with babies. This sing-song use of language appears to be spontaneous and we seem to do it because babies respond well to it.

Babies are more responsive to IDS than to facial expression and premature babies are more readily calmed by IDS than by physical actions such as stroking. IDS is found universally and its purpose changes over time. Initially, it serves to engage the baby's attention, but over time it is used to signal communicative intent. For example, particular tuneful patterns communicate comfort, approval or prohibition – or as Mithen has it, 'the melody is the message'. Later the adults' use of IDS develops to emphasise new words, to highlight individual words or phrases – directly and

explicitly supporting the child's acquisition of language.

### Singing to babies

Singing to babies seems to be vital in establishing warm communication patterns. Studies of six-month-olds show they respond more positively to a recording of their mother's singing than to her speech. In premature babies, singing had a number of positive health indicators including weight gain and early discharge from hospital. Mothers claimed that while singing calmed their babies, it had the additional benefit of improving their own sense of well-being and relaxation.

### Playful interactions

Playful interactions, such as laughter, have much in common with music-making since they too are an innate form of social signalling. Babies begin to laugh at around four months of age and this is a powerful strategy in developing communication.

Adults and children do something that makes a baby laugh, so they do it again. Babies do something that makes other people laugh and are encouraged to repeat it. Collaboration and communication are established – turn-taking and taking meaning from vocal utterances are learnt and reinforced by the integral fun, or sheer joy of being in touch with others.