

Take note

Music plays an important role in helping children to read, write and enjoy literature, says *Linda Pound*

It's important to remember that the development of reading and writing is not only dependent upon children's ability to listen and attend, understand and talk. It is also dependent on personal characteristics – such as confidence and perseverance, curiosity and critical thinking.

As we have seen throughout this series, music contributes a great deal to a child's development in the Prime areas of learning – personal and physical development and communication. But music also has a specific role to play in children's growing ability to read and write.

READING AND WRITING

Music changes the chemistry of the brain, making learning more pleasurable and thus more effective. Sally Goddard Blythe highlights a number of research studies which suggest that musical experience affects the right side of the brain, enhancing 'melody recognition, language comprehension, rhythm, spatial orientation, and picture recognition', and the left side of the brain in relation to sound discrimination and timing. All of these elements contribute strongly to children's reading development.

She cites studies which indicate that children who did best in tests of tonal memory had, regardless of age or ability, higher reading scores. A Danish study of children entering school appears to show that those who had daily song-and-dance sessions without any formal teaching of reading had greater phonological awareness than those in a control group who had been involved in regular and specific phonics workshops. Musical experience seems to improve children's memory for sounds and



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 four articles in the series, see www.nurseryworld.co.uk



to help them make a link between sounds and the movements required to make the sounds, reinforcing the learning.

This will be of particular interest to readers working in England who will be familiar with the guidance provided in *Letters and Sounds* (2007). The guidance places a strong emphasis on music and musical elements. It encourages exploration of sounds in the environment (indoors and out); with instruments and other sound-makers and with body parts (such as tapping, clapping, stamping). It also highlights the importance of a song-rich environment for phonological awareness, including songs that feature rhyme and alliteration.

The rhythm and rhyme that we now understand to be key ingredients in supporting development in reading are, of course, not only to be found in song but there are some great books, such as *Tanka Tanka Skunk!* by Steve Webb and *Chicky Chicky Chook Chook* by Cathy MacLennan, which are very engaging to young children. And don't forget perennial favourites

such as books by Dr Seuss and Julia Donaldson – many of which are impossible to read out loud without 'getting in the groove'.

The Scottish Book Trust claims that 'music teaches our ears to hear and our minds to pattern', arguing that children who are encouraged and enabled to maintain their innate ability to keep a steady beat will be better readers. Keeping a beat involves segmenting and breaking down sounds – and so does reading.

The Literacy Trust highlights research which indicates that children who are the most successful at detecting rhyme become more successful readers and that children who at the age of four can recite at least four nursery rhymes will be more competent readers by the age of eight than those who cannot.

All the benefits that music brings to the development of reading – the improved phonological awareness, segmenting, sequencing and so on – are, of course, shared in the development of writing. In addition, musical experiences promote children's

imagination, giving them ideas to share and communicate. Songs increase their vocabulary and awareness of grammar and structure. Dance supports the gross motor development which enables children to develop the fine motor control they will need for writing.

STORIES AND LITERACY

While music heightens children's awareness of sound, making them better able to match letters and sounds, it is important to remember that in the long term, writing is much more than that. Story gives children a reason for reading but it also offers a motive for writing.

An environment that is rich in narrative helps children to understand and retain information, to make better sense of their world and everything in it. Kendal Haven reminds us that our brains are hard-wired to engage with stories. He emphasises its role in comprehension and memorability of information.

Many of the contributors to Stephen Malloch and Colwyn Trevarthen's

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MAKING THE MOST OF SONGS AND RHYMES

Singing songs and rhymes at group times can involve dance, actions, instruments and fun. Large props such as frog masks or puppets for 'Five little speckled frogs', or large cut-out or dough currant buns, or a spider and drainpipe can engage children in words, sounds and action. By this means, children's enthusiasm for songs and rhymes can be developed and subsequently harnessed to support the development of reading and writing in a number of flexible ways. But the benefits that these positive experiences offer can be developed during continuous provision and offer a multimodal approach to learning:

- A book of, for example, 'Baa baa black sheep' can simply be placed in a basket for babies or toddlers together with a cuddly black sheep. They can be sung to, talked to about the sheep and encouraged to make links between print, sound and object.
- Collections of resources (commercial or home-made) can be provided to stimulate interest in songs and rhymes. These may be finger puppets or small-world figures related to particular songs or rhymes, inviting children to

rehearse the rhyming elements. Storyboards with illustrations from known rhymes can help children to understand sequencing – common to story and to phonic decoding. Pictures of Jack and Jill going up the hill, Jack falling down and Jill tumbling after can provide opportunities to sing the rhyme, place the cards in order and improve comprehension. Dressing-up materials may also promote rehearsal of known rhymes and songs.

Placed in the book area or some other readily accessible place, these printed scripts enable children to study a familiar set of words, identifying repeated words and phrases, expressing curiosity about punctuation and differences between upper- and lower-case letters, letters found in their names and letters that look like one another. The familiarity of the words means not only that children can apply one-to-one correspondence between written and spoken words but they can play with rhythm, dynamics and pitch. They can repeat the rhyme fast or slow, whispered or shouted in a squeaky or gruff voice. In their play, children will often invent rhymes for these familiar songs and can be encouraged to explore alliterative verses such as 'Polly put the pens away/ Polly put the pens away/ Polly put the pens away/ put them in the pot.'

- Song books in the book and/or music area which include some of the children's favourites will encourage them to engage with text. If some of the books have musical notation, they will offer added insight into the use of symbol systems.





THE ADULT ROLE

Throughout this series, there has been an emphasis on creating a music-rich environment. This focus is no less important for the teaching and learning of reading and writing than for any of the other areas of learning.

Phonic awareness

Listening to and creating sounds – indoors and out – can begin at a very early age and continue throughout the early years. Drawing even young babies' attention to the sound of a door closing or a known adult's voice is part of the process. Three-year-old David, for example, was highly successful at distinguishing the sounds of car engines as they passed by. The ability to discriminate between sounds lies at the heart of phonic awareness.

- Listening walks encourage children to pay attention to particular sounds.
- While games such as 'sound bingo' can be bought commercially, they can be created with children's involvement to reflect sounds in your environment.
- Exploring objects or materials such as a paper bag or a balloon to discover how many sounds can be made with them often throws up

book on musicality stress the role of narrative from children's earliest days. Baby rhymes such as 'Walking round the garden' have a story structure with context, action, suspense and climax.

That said, perhaps because of the common origins of language and music, understanding of and memory for story is enhanced by music. Think of the cultural esteem placed on opera, the popular power of staged musicals such as *The Lion King* or *Mamma Mia!*, and the hype surrounding films such as 2016's *La La Land*.

AT HOME WITH LITERACY AND MUSIC

Music is key to the development of physical, emotional and communication development, so it's never too soon to engage with children musically. Its impact on learning in general is such that we have a professional duty to encourage parents to take every opportunity to play with their children musically – singing, dancing, making sounds and so on (see, for example, www.people.org.uk/HLE).

A positive and effective home learning environment includes singing songs and rhymes with children, sharing books and pointing out and talking about letters and numbers. Many of the activities outlined in 'Making the most of songs and rhymes' (see box, previous page) could easily be carried out by parents.

Some early years settings have bags that parents can borrow and take home with a book or song card together with

props to underline key elements of the text.

A report on the importance of the home learning environment for Growing Up in Scotland states that 'parenting behaviours are learnable, and changes in parenting are associated with improved child development'. Knowing songs and rhymes is so essential to literacy development that one key way to narrow the gap between children who have lots of experience of books before school and those who do not is to get parents to sing with children.

If they claim that they don't know any songs, you can reassure them. Sites such as www.wordsforlife.org.uk/songs lists a huge collection of nursery rhymes and songs for young children together with printed words and mp3 versions. Or you can make some recordings of favourites for the website or to share through social messaging.



MORE INFORMATION

- Department for Education (2007) *Letters and Sounds: Principles and Practice of High Quality Phonics*, www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/190537/Letters_and_Sounds_-_Phase_One.pdf
- Goddard Blythe S (2004) *The Well Balanced Child: Movement and Early Learning*. Hawthorn Press
- Haven K (2007) *StoryProof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*. Libraries Unlimited
- Malloch S and Trevarthen C (Eds) (2009) *Communicative Musicality: Exploring the Basis of Human Companionship*. OUP
- www.scottishbooktrust.com/blog/2012/10/how-keeping-the-beat-helps-children-become-better-readers
- Webb S (2003) *Tanka Tanka Skunk!*. Red Fox Books
- MacLennan C (2007) *Chicky Chicky Chook Chook*. Boxer Books
- Young S (2003) *Music with the Under-Fours*. Routledge/Falmer
- Melhuish E (2010) *Impact of the Home Learning Environment on Child Cognitive Development*. The Scottish Government

all sorts of ideas that adults alone might not have thought of.

- Trying to recreate the sounds using instruments encourages further careful listening.
- Exploring sounds made by hands and feet has the added advantage of creating a physical memory. You might, for example, ask children to tell others how they produce a particular sound.

Song bank

The song-rich environment advocated throughout this series is essential in supporting literacy. Songs and chants that involve rhyme are known to play a vital part in enabling children to discriminate between sounds and to use this knowledge in reading and writing. But they also give children a bank of known text which they can use in exploring print.

A song card with the words of, say, 'The wheels on the bus', lets children rehearse the words they know while identifying patterns in the text. Seeing the word round over and over again reinforces understanding that, once written, words continue to say the same thing.

Songs that tell a story, such as 'When Goldilocks went to the house of the bears', are useful in exploiting the power of story and hence motivation to engage with books and literature.

Stories with musical features

Similarly, stories that are not themselves songs can be made more engaging and memorable by adding musical features. Trip-trap played at different pitches or speeds to represent the 'three billy-goats gruff' is one such example, but it could be finding instruments or vocalisations to represent thunder or snow falling. *Peace at Last* by Jill Murphy offers many sounds that could be made with instruments or simple sound-makers around the room.

Four-year-old Amy, for example, gently rubbed a textured silky scarf between her fingers to imitate the snuffling of a hedgehog. Children can be encouraged to represent graphically the sounds they have made – underlining the power of symbolic representation. And don't forget that all the skills you have in making use of musical elements, by varying the rhythm, the texture and the volume of your voice, enhance the quality of story-telling and the likelihood of children becoming enthusiastic readers and writers. ■