

Surround sound?

Does your setting consider the impact of its music choices on children? Evidence suggests the area needs more thought, argues *Nicola Burke*

Working as an early childhood music specialist across a variety of settings in the UK, I have become increasingly troubled by the recorded music that is being played in the settings I have visited.

When the framework for an early years curriculum was first introduced in 1996, the way we accessed recorded music was very different from how we do it today. In 1996, we were largely dependent on CDs; today, anyone can access thousands of recordings of music of all styles, from all parts of the world, via the click of a button.

I wanted to establish if early childhood education recognises how easy it is to access music to provide young children with a range of listening opportunities. I also wanted to determine if we are encouraging young children to listen and how carefully we think about the audio environments we are creating for young ears.

As part of my MA in Early Childhood Music Studies (see www.crec.co.uk/MA-in-education-early-years-music-module), I decided to conduct some research into this area and it soon became apparent that this had not been researched before.

My research involved a written questionnaire and a small amount of telephone interviews. I wanted to discover what styles of music early childhood practitioners use and for what purposes they make use of it. There were some common themes regarding how and when music was used and some shared thoughts from practitioners regarding music, with some styles considered 'inappropriate' for young children to hear.



All the respondents indicated that they used recorded music in their settings. To ensure I obtained a broad spectrum of views, the respondents represented all types of settings, including children's centres, primary schools, childminders, before- and after-school clubs, pre-schools, day nurseries, nursery schools and private music classes.

TOP FIVE

What emerged from my research was an overwhelmingly clear top five styles of music: nursery rhymes, classical, pop, Christmas and relaxing music.

It is, of course, not surprising that nursery rhymes were the most commonly indicated. This material is produced specifically for young children and it seems that it would make sense to be playing this style of music within settings.

Classical music ranked second and one interviewee said that classical music is used because it is considered 'high art'. Pop music ranked number three, but there were some contrasting opinions about the use of it in settings. Some respondents felt that pop

Is children's music making affected by the music being played in the background?

Educators will discuss how the environment should look, but the audio environment does not seem to be given the same thought



music was inappropriate for young children to hear so it was never used within their setting, while others said that they used it regularly.

Of course, we have to be careful about the lyrical content of songs played to children; some pop music does contain expletives and sexual content. However, we also have to ask: is all pop music inappropriate for young children?

It appears there is little in the way of discussion regarding styles of music used. Some respondents were not really sure why they did not use a wider range. Rock music was not indicated and perhaps some think this style of music is inappropriate for young ears – but what is appropriate?

There was a strong line of thought about use of music for atmosphere,



mood and for the influence on emotional states – for example, to calm and relax children. Relaxing music was even classified as a style and was in the top five indicated within the completed questionnaires.

It was not, however, clear what was meant by ‘relaxing’ music. This is interesting as it appears that there is an assumption that many children will respond to styles of music in a similar way. Are we aware of the styles of music that individual children find relaxing? What one child finds relaxing will not necessarily be the same as another.

From my personal experience, I know there is certain music I find relaxing but others find irritating.

AUDIO WALLPAPER

The largest indication from respondents of how music was used was for movement – again, not a particularly surprising finding as music and movement are so intrinsically related. The second most indicated use of music was for use in the background.

Sims (1990) suggested that there is a real danger in today’s society that ‘children are learning not to listen’ and referred to the term ‘audiothrombosis’. This is a term created by the Foundation for the Advancement of Education in Music, referring to a ‘disease’ whose primary symptom is numbness to music. This is due to music being so pervasive in everyday life. If music is played in the background, are children aware that it is there? Does it become audio wallpaper? Is it having a positive impact?

Consider the following question – do you prefer to have music on in the

background while you are concentrating? Some of you will answer yes, while others will say no. When young children are playing they are exploring, learning and thinking and are, of course, often concentrating. Background music may well be hindering their learning experience. We are surrounded by music and sound in everyday environments, so how much silence do we offer young children not only in early childhood environments but in everyday environments?

A surprising finding was that recorded music was rarely used for musical purposes other than singing; actual music listening was not mentioned at all. There was little use of recorded music specifically for or within musical activities, which begs the question: why is there such little music listening in music activities?

WITHOUT PURPOSE

From my personal experience of working in early childhood settings, I have found that the visual and tangible environment is of high importance and takes precedence over the audio environment. Educators will discuss how to lay out resources and how the environment should look, but the audio environment does not

MORE INFORMATION

If you would like to read Nicola’s full dissertation, contact her at nicola@musicforearlyyears.co.uk

seem to be given the same priority or thought. This is even to the extent that music is used in the background without a specific purpose.

The impact that playing recorded music is having on young children’s listening skills, communication development, musicality and creativity is as yet unknown. Children’s emotional well-being may also be impacted; music can be very emotive and the music played could be having an instant effect on children and how they feel.

Studies have been conducted into young children’s preferences for music (Hargreaves, 1982; Hargreaves and Castell, 1987; Kopiez and Lehmann, 2008; LeBlanc, 1982) and listening abilities (Cohen, Thorpe and Trehub, 1987; Sims, 1995; Trainor and Trehub, 1992) and some of the findings suggest that exposing young children to a range of styles of music could be beneficial.

Children need to be offered a range of musical activities to enable them to have rich and varied musical experiences. The findings of my research show that not only is there a minimal amount of styles played for young children, but there is a general lack of music listening in early childhood education.

Further research and debate is needed in this area to enable us to have a deeper understanding of the impact that recorded music is having and can have on children. ■

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HOW CAN WE USE MUSIC EFFECTIVELY?

Consider the following:

- What music are you playing in your setting? Why? Who are you playing it for?
- Observe the responses of children when music is being played – are the children aware that music is being played?
- Experiment with different styles of music for specific

listening activities.

- Encourage children to move freely to the music that they are listening to.
- Invite children and parents to share music from home.
- Encourage children to talk about the music that they are listening to.
- Within your staff team discuss what you feel

is appropriate and inappropriate music to play and why.

- Play music while children have access to instruments and observe how they play – is their music making affected by the music that is being played? Do they play differently to different styles?