

## **Communicative musicality: sound, pulse and rhythm in music and language**

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### **Introduction and background**

The association between human speech, language and communication and music is manifest in music education and psychology literature in a number of ways. For example, research has shown that a developing foetus can discriminate sounds in the womb from 22 weeks gestation and that early sound discrimination helps to promote later phonic and vocabulary development (Hepper, 1992). In addition, during early social interaction between caregivers and infants there are noticeable patterns of timing, pulse, voice timbre, and gesture that follow many of the rules of musical performance, including rhythm and timing conceptualised by Malloch and Trevarthen (2010) as 'communicative musicality'. Powers and Trevarthen (2009) noted the significance of daily patterns and rhythms that occur in family social patterns and practices in children's musicality and communication, stressing that 'long before they can speak, infants begin adapting to the parental culture and the family responds, giving objects and actions a clear sharable sense for the learner by offering rhythmic participation in rituals and tasks.' For some children, music can serve as a proxy language, for example where children have limited speech (Ockleford, 2010).

As far as formal care and education is concerned, the centrality of communication in children's learning of development has been established in early years policy (Blackburn, 2014, Blackburn and Aubrey, 2015). To date the potential of music in early years' settings remains unrecognised or at least undervalued and the contrasting attitudes of staff towards mark-making (literacy) and music-making (creativity) are striking (Fawcett, 2012) although more recently as far as early childhood research is concerned Pitt (2014) has studied the role of group parent-child music activities in Children's Centres and Powell, Gouch and Werth (2013) have explored the role of Froebel's Mother Songs in Daycare with baby room practitioners.

The English Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2014) places music as an activity to be promoted under expressive arts and design as a 'specific' area of learning, whilst communication and literacy is a 'prime' area of learning, even though early sound discrimination promoted by music activities is a foundational step for phonic and vocabulary development. Furthermore as noted by Young (2007), the emphasis on language acquisition in early childhood as well as the basic skills of literacy and numeracy means that practitioners and researchers are required to explicitly demonstrate the efficacy of music in supporting

children's wider learning rather than appreciating children's creative competencies. There is also concern that the quality and appropriateness of music activities offered to young children and their parents are given due consideration (Young, 2007). Papousek (1996: 108) stressed the importance of informal musical stimulation for very young children, illustrating the importance of children's spontaneous and natural rhythmic patterns:

For the infancy period, it may be advisable not to disturb the earliest forms of intuitive musical stimulation by rationally guided artificial manipulations and formal educational interventions, but to keep them concealed as a precious part of early parent-infant relationships.'

As stated by Young (2007) the majority of research into musicality in children under the age of five has been laboratory-based experimental research with little conducted in home or early years settings, except for children aged three to five where the focus has been on music education. A further limitation of research in this area is the research sample which has been predominantly white, middle-class North American or North West European mothers and their infants. Little research has been carried out in relation to the musicality of children aged three to five and even less on the musical activities of children aged birth to five in the home in England with varied socio-cultural populations.

The study reported here aimed to describe and analyse the views, perceptions and reported practices of stakeholders (parents and early years practitioners) interested in young children's musical interactions. Given the established association between music and human communication (see Malloch and Trevarthen, 2010; Ockleford, 2001; Ockleford, 2010), the project seeks to identify how young children are involved in musical activities in home and out-of-home early years settings starting with an initial survey of families to establish children's participation in musical activities in the home. Research questions for this phase of the research included:

- What are the views, perceptions and reported practices of interested stakeholders in young children's musical activities?
- What musical activities are young children involved in within home settings?

The survey is seen as a scoping study for further research into how the association between music and communication development can be promoted amongst stakeholders interested in young children's well-being, learning and development. Children's experiences in the home contribute to their overall learning and development. Therefore, involving parents in an initial survey will provide some insight into children's earliest experiences.

### **Theoretical assumptions about children's development**

Shared music activities between adults and children serve the function of 'signs' or 'cultural tools' as parents and carers use the conventions of songs and nursery rhymes to build their child's understandings of cultural conventions (Vygotsky, 1978). Grandparents also have an important role to play in co-constructing knowledge with young children in episodes of reciprocal learning opportunities afforded by musical activities (de Vries, 2012) stressing the role of guided participation (Rogoff, 2003). Bronfenbrenner (1993) stressed the influence of the multiple integrative contexts on children's development and the relationships between them from proximal processes of adult-child social interactions in micro context of home and

early years settings to the macro influence of policy contexts. Therefore the interpretation of macro level policy intentions at the micro level of home and early years settings in relation to how adults prioritise particular activities and opportunities for young children is of interest.

## **Methodology**

An online survey was designed and trialled with three parents and carers of children aged birth to five before being formally launched and advertised using existing networks and social media. Attempts were made to promote the survey as widely as possible to a range of different social and cultural groups, for example, parenting groups aimed at both genders, groups for grandparents and minority ethnic and cultural groups, fostering networks and general social media groups. Parents, grandparents and foster carers of children aged birth to five residing in England were invited to participate. Questions included closed questions relating to demographics of participants and number and ages of children in the family as well as the category of musical activities that young children participated in and these allowed for descriptive quantitative data. Open questions about the perceived benefit of young children's participation in musical activities in the home, organised musical activities outside the home and general comments provided qualitative data. The ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) were followed at all times with regard to consent, anonymity, right to withdraw, storage of data, researcher conduct and equality.

## **Analysis**

Data were analysed to answer the research questions at the first level allowing common and discrepant themes to emerge subsequently.

## **Results**

### *Participants*

A total of 125 responses were received to the online survey. Five responses were from outside England (America, Scotland and Europe) and these were excluded from the data analysis which left 120 responses. Of these 80% were parents, 17% were grandparents and 3% were foster carers. The participants had 157 children between them 52% of which were boys and 48% girls. The number of children reported in each age band was similar with the majority being the in 12 – 24 and 48-60 month age bands. A few children were reported to have difficulties in their learning and development. As might be expected the number of children attending early years settings rose incrementally with age.

### *Themes*

Themes emerged from analysis of the data in the areas of the importance of participation in musical activities in the home; the value of participation in musical activities for children's overall development; the nature and frequency of musical activities that children participate in within the home; the role of adults and technology in children's musical activities; the range of organised musical activities that children participate in outside the home; the perceived difference between spontaneous musicality organised, structured musical activities.

i) Value of participation in musical activities

All but one participant answered positively to a question about the importance of young children's participation in musical activities. The remaining participant stated that she felt it was "important for children to choose their own activities." The reasons given by participants for affirmative answers to this question related to the perceived benefits for children's learning, development and well-being.

The primary benefit was that participation in musical activities served to promote children's communication skills. Included in this were the skills of listening, speech, language and self-expression. Following this, children's enjoyment and sense of fun was thought to be important as was the benefit for children's 'brain development'. The perceived benefits were wide-ranging and included aspects related to spirituality and humanity and emotions as exemplified by the comments below:

Music is part of being human. Interaction with music allows children to express their emotions and feelings including sadness, love, singing, happiness, joy, imagination, movement, anger, quiet time, dance, joy and exuberance.

It helps to develop children's communication and language children learn best through activities and experiences that engage all senses eg music dance rhymes and songs. Communication helps children to build social relationships and enables them to become skilful communicators.

This is a house full of music and both my children have been sung to and listened to music since birth. Firstly they love it and secondly it's a great way of learning.

Eight participants felt that music was effective for communicating with pre-linguistic infants. For six participants, children have toy instruments and four had 'real instruments' whilst another two said that children make their own instruments and another that children use ipad apps to make music.

## ii) Frequency of involvement in musical activities

The majority of parents (73%) reported that children participate in musical activities every day, with the remainder reporting that children participated less frequently but in most cases at least weekly.

Twenty-one participants qualified this answer by saying that music was a part of everyday life, nine said that they sing to their children 'all the time'. For eight participants, music was something that happened in particular contexts, as "music/singing is something that takes place mostly in the car" whilst for five grandparents, the frequency was determined by the frequency of visits from grandchildren. Two participants said that frequency depends on the weather as music was something that happened indoors and if the weather was fine, the children would be outdoors.

Music is part of our life. We sing to make things interesting e.g. phonics, car journeys. Our son is autistic and music helps him to reduce anxiety and relax.

I care for the children 2 days per week and know how it is beneficial to their all-round development so we do lots of singing and musical activities which are greatly enjoyed.

#### ii) Typology of musical activity

Participation in shared musical activities was reported by participants more frequently than solitary musical activities. The activity that children were reported to participate in most frequently was listening to music with others, followed by singing with others and dancing to music with others, with playing musical instruments with others less frequent than other shared activities. Included in the 'other' category were:

- Using music apps on touchscreen technology (ipad);
- Finding out what objects make different sounds, the creation of sounds using different objects;
- Creating their own music with instruments, sound makers and their own voice;
- Being sung to (for example bed-time lullabies);
- Performing actions to songs.

#### iii) Access to musical activities

The majority of participants reported that children had free access to musical activities of some sort in the home (84%), although some parents reported that access to particular activities was limited for a variety of factors:

She ignores musical instruments if they are left out, but is really excited when the box of instruments is brought out. We also don't have music playing all the time, so again access is limited - though she can and does sing or dance without music at any point during the day

Factors that limited access were reported to relate to:

- The cost of buying real instruments for five participants;
- The child's age and inability to utilise real instruments for five participants;
- Adult supervision is required for real instruments or activities that require the use of technology for four participants;
- Limited instruments available within the home for two participants;
- Parents had hearing difficulties making the 'noise' of children's musical activities a barrier for one participant;
- Grandparents' profession (childminder) meant that instruments needed to be stored safely for one participant;
- Adult time was a barrier for one participant;
- One child was reported to "not engage with music."

#### iv) Adult participation in children's musical activities

Nearly all participants stated that they joined in with children's musical activities in the home (98%). Not surprisingly, the activities that most participants joined in with were singing with others, listening to music with others, dancing with others and playing musical instruments

with others. However, a proportion of participants said that they joined in when children were engaged in these activities in solitary.

v) The role of technology in children's musical activities

The role of technology in children's participation in musical activities in the home was influential for 65% participants across the range of activities discussed, even with activities such as playing instruments alone. This included computers, touchscreen technology and TVs.

vi) Children's participation in organised musical activities inside and outside the home

A relatively small number of children (11.6%) were reported to be participating in organised musical activities in the home including lessons to use a piano (six), a guitar (three), a violin (two), a cello (two) and a clarinet (one). However, two participants stated that children at this age were too young for instruments and were "playing around with sounds."

A significant number of participants reported that their children participated in a range of organised musical activities outside the home (64%). The perceived benefits of children participating in organised musical activities were similar but subtly different to those for children's spontaneous and shared activities with families inside the home. For example, the primary benefit for organised musical activities related to children's social interaction and social development with communication being secondary to this and fun/enjoyment being less significant than for spontaneous musical activities. There was no association made between organised musical activities and spirituality or humanity as was the case for spontaneous activities.

All aspects of the EYFS can be supported through music sessions e.g. music from other cultures, counting through song, moving to music.

One parent expressed her concern over the quality of music provision within her child's early years setting, echoing concerns from Young (2007) about the quality of musical activities offered to young children in formal settings:

The singing at the nursery is of very poor quality. The instruments at the nursery are excellent but without beaters and not presented/supported well.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper has reported on the findings from an online survey of parents, grandparents and foster carers of children aged birth to five residing in England. The narrow socio-cultural sample of self-selected responses is a limitation. However, 120 participants responded and this provided a sufficiently large sample for this pilot study which can be used to attempt to widen the sample to other parts of the population. The sample also provided an overview of young children's musical activities within and outside the home for children aged from birth to five in line with the age range for the Early Years Foundation Stage in England and this represents an under-researched area of early learning and development.

Young children in this study were participating in musical activities daily in most cases and in almost all cases at least weekly. The range of musical activities was wide and adults were joining in with children's musical activities. The role of technology in children's musical

activities is an interesting finding and this will be worthy of further exploration in interviews with parents, carers and grandparents.

Participants in this study appeared to recognise the value and importance of children's spontaneous musical activities and to encourage it describing the benefit for children's holistic development and the role of music in attachment and bonding. They also appear to have identified benefits for children in participating in organised, structured musical activities both within the home, but more substantially outside the home and this is a further area of interest to explore in interview.

Using social media to promote surveys and invite participants is problematic and can result in a narrow self-selected sample. Further research could explore how to interest a wider range of participants in research when using social media to promote and invite participants.

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