

# “Grow Their Brains” with Music

**T**hirteen month old Jeremy climbed onto the rocking horse and began to sway back and forth smiling with glee as he rocked. As I watched him, I began to sing, “Riding along, singin’ a cowboy song, riding along, singin’ a song . . . .” Jeremy stopped rocking upon hearing the song. He knew the tune from our music classes – the children would wear a cowboy hat and ride a wooden stick “pony” as they sang the song. I watched Jeremy with growing fascination, realizing that he was associating the rocking pony he was sitting on with the music class stick pony. His voice quivered and then grew louder as he actually began to sing. I couldn’t believe my ears – Jeremy was tuning his voice to the key of the song! He then began rocking back and forth again on the rocking horse while he sang the tonic note (of the key) which matched the song.

“Just thinking about that moment gives me goose bumps!” recounts Janine Connell, the Founder, Director and Music Teacher at Windmill Creek Academy, a private preschool located in Naples. Connell holds music degrees from the Peabody Conservatory of Music of the Johns Hopkins University as well as George Mason University.

“I felt as though I was literally watching the wheels turning in Jeremy’s head. As soon as he began to tune his voice to the song – one he’s heard many times in our little music classes – it’s as if a light switch was turned, ‘on.’ This is a little boy that’s barely one year old – it’s as though all the synapses were firing in Jeremy’s brain – an amazing moment!”

Indeed. Music truly helps develop your child’s brain by making connections not only for music, but for higher-brain function. Even if you aren’t looking to turn your son or daughter into the world’s next great concert pianist or violin protégée – don’t stop reading! Research shows that musical education expands young minds into other arenas of development.

Both the right and left hemispheres of the brain are involved in processing music, or, “whole brain” learning. Susan Black, author of *The Musical Mind* (The American School Board Journal, January 1997) reveals that musical experiences are displayed in the brain as “multi-modal, involving auditory, visual, cognitive, affective, and

motor systems.” Studies show that early and on-going musical training helps organize and develop children’s brains.

According to Dr. Frances Rauscher, psychologist at the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh, musical training appears to dramatically enhance a child’s abstract thinking skills and spatial-temporal ability – skills necessary for mathematics and science – even more than computer instruction does.

Rauscher goes on to say, “The 100 billion neurons in a baby’s brain are eager and willing to learn and grow, but to do so they need stimulation

and enrichment to form connections (synapses) and to grow branching

extensions (dendrites). When their brains are nourished with music, young children grow more connections and extensions.” In effect, they get smarter!

Rauscher contends, “Music might be considered a pre-language which, while children are very young, excites inherent brain patterns and promotes their use in complex reasoning tasks. Based on our findings, we predict that music training at an early age – when the connections in the brain are most plastic – provides exercise for higher brain functions.”

Not only does music help expand the brain, Harvard University’s Howard Gardner (renowned for his theory of “multiple



intelligences”), indicates music helps organize the way we think and work by helping develop other areas such as math, language and spatial reasoning.

### READY MAESTRO?

“That’s great!” you say, but what if you can’t sing yourself out of a wet paper bag and the only tune you can play on the piano is, “chopsticks?” Additionally, you might argue, with shrinking household budgets and a less than glowing economy, you aren’t finding the line item “music education” in any of the monthly columns. Have no fear – by simply opening your ears, awakening the kid in yourself ... and perhaps losing a little personal inhibition, you can begin to open the doors of musical education for your children.

“Open the world of music to your children by exposing them to different kinds of music,” offers Connell. “Don’t get stuck on your same iPod play lists. You owe it to your children to expose them to a ‘world of music’ play list – jazz, chamber music, instrumental music, and vocal music. Listen to the music with your children and then ask questions about how it made them feel. What did they like? What didn’t they like? Why? These conversations not only grow your musical appreciation, they help to build your children’s vocabulary, conversational skills, listening skills, and provide great ‘mom and me’ or ‘dad and me’ time.”

### CREATE YOUR OWN LIFE SOUNDTRACK

Connell leads Music & Movement classes with her students at Windmill Creek Academy. “You’ve just got to lose your inhibition and find the music in all that you do. When I was changing my daughter’s diapers, I would make “whooshing” and “clicking” sound-effects with each nip and tuck of her diaper. I would make up silly songs as I counted her ten little toes. She loved it and I loved that time too – create your own life soundtrack.”

After listening to music together, begin to participate in it. “Throw a few beans in an empty water bottle, screw on the lid and you’ve got maracas; pop the lid on an empty coffee container and you’ve got a make-shift drum,” says Connell. “The world is a musical place, if you shift your awareness and you’re open to listening to it. We live in a world of visual stimulation, but listening, truly listening, is such a tremendous skill to develop.”

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## Got Music?

### Tips to expand your child’s world of music.

- If your children nap, try putting on various types of music: Classical, “new age,” “ballet,” Spanish guitar, and more. Expose your child to something you don’t always listen to.
- Turn your kitchen into a symphony orchestra. Pull out pots and pans (explore how various sizes make different sounds); bring out wooden and metal spoons; fill glasses with varying amounts of water and gently “clink” the side to explore how the tones go higher as you increase the water level.
- While doing day-to-day tasks with your children (i.e., changing their diapers, getting them dressed, cleaning up) make a song out of it. “I’m putting away my blocks, blocks, blocks”, or try “put your arm in this hole, and then we’ll zip, zip, zip. Put your foot in this sock so we don’t trip, trip, trip.” The crazier the better.
- Put on some instrumental music and have your child act it out. Using props can be fun – secure a ribbon on a stick and let it “dance” through the air as your child moves about. If your child is very young, light-weight scarves work well, too.

The point is to start expanding your child’s world to include music and music education. Certainly, what music your child learns to appreciate will stay with them their whole lives, but the biggest piece of this pie is that your child will experience increased brain function. Now that’s a pie we all should eat.



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