

Dalcroze and the very young child
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Introduction

Sessions for the very young child with his/her parent or adult carer are an increasingly popular way of introducing children to music. The aim of such sessions can reach far beyond musical development and support the child in his/her physical, emotional and social development. It can benefit the child, the parent and above all their relationship.

The use of movement as an expression of the music is a most innate and natural primal language to any baby or toddler, in fact, it would be more difficult to prevent the child from moving! Sessions based on Dalcroze principles encourage learning about music through movement, appealing greatly to young children and encourage parents to integrate music into everyday life right from the beginning.

Musical aims

Riches can be found in music for children in every culture and style. At the heart of much music lie the melodies and rhythmic elements originally taken from simple folk tunes and songs for children.

Singing provides the most natural and immediate way to make music, offering a flexible and wide range of expressive sounds and a huge range of songs. Songs can come from traditional to improvised sources. Some are aimed at the children's vocal participation and consideration of simplicity of intervals and vocal range is made.

Others can be sung by the parents to the children, providing a richer variety of range, style and content, while the children participate through actions and movements.

The leader uses improvised music as well as a wide variety of songs and Nursery rhymes from a culturally rich background, played on a variety of instruments. Recorded music, if chosen appropriately, also has a place.

The musical elements used and worked on are basic and simple: regular beat/pulse, changes in tempo, simple rhythmic patterns, melodies within an appropriate range and including the child's first commonly used intervals and patterns, different modes, textures, dynamics, as well as silence/rests.

Simple percussion instruments and neutral props such as scarves, beanbags, balls and hoops encourage participation, as well as developing aural, visual and tactile and physical awareness. The children can learn to play the instruments by experimenting, exploring and copying, creating different tempi, dynamics, timbres.

Use of movement and body language

Musical aims within a Dalcroze based session will always involve a whole body experience, not only in order to engage the child, but to help the music to be internalized and owned. Pulse and rhythm in any form are basically a physical experience. Most young children know this intuitively and will not hesitate to make full use of the opportunity to move. With babies, the range of movements is initially limited, but develops rapidly over the first three years of life. Music can motivate to explore and experiment with elements such as co-ordination, expression and spatial awareness. The movement in turn brings the music to life and highlights musical concepts. The combined experience is simultaneously physical, aural, visual and emotional and therefore most appealing to the young child.

Language development

Development of listening skills is at the core of every activity. Listening forms the basis of any language skill and both music and movement contribute towards verbal communication skills.

The emotional development

The playful atmosphere within the safe boundaries provides a sense of safety and security. The presence of the adult is not only practically essential, but it provides the opportunity for the parent and child to add new ways of communicating and interacting. The adult can be given a positive tool to re-visit the child's world of imagination and creativity and to enter a playful way to relate to the child. This supports the attachment process positively. It explores the many meaningful ways to relate, often including gestures, facial expressions, eye contact and touch. Music, emotionally rich and powerful, remains the basis and framework of most activities.

Sessions often provide the child's first social contact outside the immediate circle of family and friends. It offers an opportunity for relationships to be formed and community to be built. Integrating children with special needs is common place.

Format of sessions

A safe, empty room with a suitable floor and preferably a piano is ideal, big enough to provide space for movement. The length of the sessions and the exact combination of number and ages of children with parents can vary according to circumstances. Ideally the children are of very similar age and the groups are not too big. Regularity, routine and repetition helps to make the children feel safe and the adults affirmed.

Sessions can be held privately in community halls, homes and Music Centres, as well as a part of the weekly program in Children's Centres, nurseries and playgroups.

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