

Music making which helps achieve emotional balance

Sal McKeown finds out how the glockenspiel-like Bambajam Pelangi, and other instruments supplied by Drums for Schools, are made from natural resources and are a spur to creative music making which all children can enjoy.

The Bambajam Pelangi, from a company called Drums for Schools, was awarded a *Practical Pre-School Gold Award* and it already has many fans in nurseries.

Andrea Barlone owns Hickory House Nursery, in Daventry, which has just celebrated its 20th anniversary. The three storey building hosts around a hundred children, from three months to five years, and they create music every single day. Some children struggle, either because they are so young or lack a sense of rhythm, or they have not yet developed the necessary grip or motor skills to play instruments.

Andrea was delighted when she was offered the chance to try out a Bambajam Pelangi. 'It is like glockenspiel or xylophone,' she says. 'But it comes apart because the keys can be removed from the frame to be played as single toned percussion instruments which means that four or five children can have a go at the same time.' It is very portable and this is ideal in a setting such as Hickory House which is on different floors and has an outdoor area. 'We can have bits of the instrument in different places, used by children of different ages,' says Andrea. 'It is just brilliant.'

Reaching out

Craig Trafford used to be an SEN and early years' specialist who worked with children with special needs in Ireland, visiting local schools to run music sessions. What Craig saw



in many of the settings was teachers bending over time and again to pick things up and children becoming very disheartened. This was not his vision of music making so he started to look at ways of making music more accessible for all children. He is now a member of the Sound Children Team, a company which sells music kits with unusual instruments but also provides music cards and guides so that adult helpers know what they are doing.

Staff in pre-school settings can lack confidence in their music making abilities and are perhaps more focused on

an end product – some sort of performance – rather than valuing the process. 'Quite often you see an adult putting their hands on a child's hands to play a musical instrument,' says Craig. 'I don't recommend this. It stops being the child's music. Instead, if you provide them with instruments which are imaginative and exciting it will create a hunger in them to reach out, to strive, to be a little bit more creative. You offer them a challenge and a reward which is a far cry from just hitting the right note and producing a sound.'

Some settings are not fully aware of the value of music

making activities. For Craig, music is partly about helping children to find an emotional balance. 'In 2008 when the financial crisis hit I saw children coming from stressed homes where families were losing their jobs. The children were replicating signs of stress when they came into school or nursery. I used music to help them feel joy, to create a place which was free from problems.' This approach is especially relevant these days when the mental health of young children is a key concern. It seems that music can create a space in their heads where for a short time they can be free from anxiety and this breathing

space may in turn help them to become more resilient.

Supporting language

Research shows that music is also linked to language. Early songs help reinforce the rhythm of language, syntax and the way that groups of words flow together but Craig thinks it goes further. He believes that music provides the building blocks for language, which in turn is the tool for thinking and for empathy. Music helps children to visualise, to see pictures. It also wakes up the whole body: 'Anyone singing



regularly will start to feel healthier as it vibrates the sinuses and releases oxygenated blood to the brain and the neural pathways.'

Craig wants to make sure that all children can access the benefits of music. As well as being an early years and special needs expert he is also an Educational Kinesiologist. When Craig was working in Herefordshire in a special school he found that some children had problems with gripping objects. He tried to make adaptations, tying instruments to a child's wrist or adding straps. Then he came up with the idea

Drums for schools

Craig met Andy Dwatkin, owner of Drums for Schools and Sound Children, 10 years ago and found that they had similar views about making music more inclusive. Andy wanted to create a range of affordable quality instruments and found people with the skills and knowledge he needed in Bali. All the instruments are Fair Trade. He employs a group of families who work to World Music and Indigenous Instrument templates.

The accompanying cards offer interesting starter ideas. For example drumming can be challenging because a child has to hold sticks, concentrate on not dropping them and try to keep to a pre-set rhythm. Instead, try bouncing ping-pong balls on a drum to generate different sounds and see if it is louder or quieter if it is dropped from a height.

Many of the instruments sold by Drums for Schools look

and feel different. Children can shake or stroke them or simply wear them and move their body. Children don't have to learn to play an instrument they just experiment and see what it can do.

The Belt Shaker is similar to the weighted belts worn by belly dancers. A child wears an apron with an adjustable Velcro fastening. This is covered with Pangi seeds, also known as Balinese Chestnuts, which make a delightful noise when shaken. Children can make music by twisting, jumping up and down or swaying from side to side.

Some children are deterred by the weight of musical instruments. With this in mind Drums for Schools has come up with new bamboo djembes. These are goblet shaped drums from West Africa which are normally made from wood and are quite heavy. The new versions are made from woven bamboo fibres and so

are just a third of the weight of traditional versions.

The Rowdy Music Maker looks a little like a Roald Dahl creation and the description 'an all-in-one music exploration machine' does nothing to dispel this image. Imagine an umbrella on a stand with a host of musical instruments hanging there, just waiting to be chosen. Up to eight children can play together, touching, twisting, shaking and hitting, pulling and pushing and, because they can see each other, it encourages conversation and children start to appreciate that music can be a communal activity.

From the Bambajam Pelangi to belts and necklaces, the instruments are made from natural resources including different varieties of wood, fruit husks and shells. It is all a far cry from the plastic mass produced replicas and will encourage a more creative approach to music making.

of clothing. Now there is a range of musical bracelets and necklaces, cushions, belts and tunics. 'I tried on the first tunic,' he said. 'It was a bit tight across the chest because it was made for a child but I knew it was going to work.'



'Lovely sounds'

'We have been trialling the Bambajam Pelangi here at Southam Beehive, part of the Bright Horizons nursery group. Children have really enjoyed using the Xylophone both inside and in the garden. It's easy to handle and designed for little hands to explore independently.

'The older pre-school children have used the song cards following Bambajam's symbols on the keys which are pictorial as well as having numbers. Children have loved tapping out simple tunes, especially their names or parts of them.

'It's portable, attractive and tactile and as one little girl said: 'It's beautiful because it makes lovely sounds.'

Angie Keane, nursery manager

Further information

- Drums for Schools
<https://www.drumsforschools.com/>
- SEN Making Music Toolkit
http://pdf toolkit.net/easy_mac/?gclid=CP6G67P5zdACFU16Gwod4eQGZA