

Why teach music to young children?

By Orly Zalel

Alongside these important recent developments in brain research, music educators are still learning by observation about the unique relationship between musical training and academic ability and musical training and well-being.

Professor Philip Sheppard of the Royal Academy of Music says: "Ensnaring a child's imagination with music can build on their ability to focus and be creative; it can boost their memory and communication skills, and therefore impact positively on their 'intelligence', which is an overarching ability – the ability to learn."

Here are some benefits of teaching music to young children.

- **Social skills:** Playing in an orchestra or any musical ensemble enhances teamwork skills and discipline. In order for an ensemble to sound good, all players must work together harmoniously towards the main goal – the performance. During the rehearsals, players learn to communicate and co-operate with each other.
- **Empathy:** Music provides children with an internal glimpse of other individuals and cultures and teaches them to be empathetic towards them. This development of compassion and empathy, as opposed to development of greed and a 'me first' attitude, provides a bridge across individual and cultural chasms and leads to respect of others at an early age.
- **Emotional skills:** Music evokes and arouses emotions and affects not only the emotional response and the kinds of emotional language that can be used, but also affects the topics participants choose to disclose. Music promotes greater expression, and actually causes an increase in the pleasure participants get from listening to music.
- **Memory:** Music can trigger powerful recollections and increase long-term memory. College students who had received musical training before age 12 remembered significantly more words from a list than other students.
- **Self-confidence:** Music provides children with a means of self-expression and self-esteem that directly supports and develops their self-confidence. Engaging in musical activity demands full commitment, like practicing and attending rehearsals, while performance teaches young people to conquer fear and to take risks.
- **Learning skills:** Through music study, students learn the value of sustained effort to achieve excellence and the concrete rewards of hard work. Giving a child a sense of achievement, improving



self-esteem, self-discipline, expression, social skills (negotiation and compromise; especially in group music situations) and commitment to projects. All these skills are good for learning in general.

• **Linguistic ability:** Recent studies have clearly indicated that musical training physically develops the part of the left side of the brain known to be involved with processing language. Other studies have found that listening to music and practice can help children develop verbal skills and phonological awareness.

• **Math and physics:** Listening and playing music is a complex mental process of construction, whereby we seek order and patterns in the vibration of the sound molecules around us. In music we have the opportunity to practice learning rule structures, to test expectations similarly to math and physics,

"As far back as the 19th century, music was believed to have an impact on the size of the brain. Childhood brain development research has been going on for decades, but in recent years, medical technology such as MRI actually allows a peek at the living brain at work. This allows researchers to observe the effects of music on brain activity." (A. Kingsbury)

though in a safe and rewarding context.

• **Musicality:** Babies are born musical; they can recognise familiar voices and music they heard in the uterus. Infants can distinguish differences in pitch, melody and rhythm from a very early age, but these musical qualities are lost if the baby doesn't use them.

Dr Lauren Stewart, of Goldsmiths University, says: "Musicality is a super skill that confers multiple benefits: motor coordination between effectors, integration of sensory modalities and online performance monitoring, so we don't need 'formal' musical training to develop skills in music. But we do need to keep using our innate skills.

Musical engagement is a vital part of education and the key to using music as part of learning is participation and not just passive reception. Involving children in music-making provides a multitude of benefits for their cognitive, neurological and social development, as well as for the classroom environment in general.

But in spite of all the knowledge we have, there has generally been very little change to the practice of music in education. The paradox is that music is still often seen as a leisure activity that has limited benefits when it comes to preparing someone for the real world. Nothing could be further from the truth. **PS**

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