THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EARLY YEARS

The ‘early years’ are the formative years upon which the rest of life is constructed. This is the time when the brain is at its most plastic and much of what we learn at this time lays the foundation for who we are to become. Patterns and habits that are formed early in life are very difficult to change as we get older. It is important that parents and educators invest time and the right resources to maximise the potential of children in these years, to enable them to live full and productive lives.

There is evidence to suggest that the first eight years, ‘the early years’ are the most crucial for learning. Darwin discovered that a challenging environment stimulates brain growth so this is a time when we can greatly influence a child’s development. A report by Allen (2011) supported the provision of early intervention schemes to ensure a more productive population for the future.

The First Three Years

A child’s speech develops gradually, based upon what they hear. Early language and literacy development begins in a child’s first three years. Usually children will begin to use words at about twelve months old. At around fifteen months they may have a handful of words they use regularly and by eighteen months they are beginning to build their vocabulary and put words together. By the age of two years children are putting more words together, using plurals, negatives and asking questions. From the age of two to three years old a child’s vocabulary trebles. Between the ages of eight months and three years of age, a child’s language comprehension and strategies become more sophisticated.
The First Five Years

At three years of age children begin to use their memories deliberately. Visual ability is mature and becomes progressively less malleable up to 8 or 9 years of age. The ability to identify the origin of a sound in terms of direction is still developing.

The First Seven-eight Years

The famous adage

‘Give me the child until he is seven and I will show you the man’

is one which expresses the importance of these early years in determining the adult at maturity.

Brierley (1994, 23) in his study supports the fact that the years from birth to seven are crucial. He advocates the use of repetition and learning by heart to embed information in the memory.

THE ROLE OF MUSIC IN EARLY SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

It seems that what we learn in early childhood may stay with us forever. According to Gardner (1985) the early years are the best time to develop sensitivity to sounds, rhythms, tones and music, which he terms ‘musical intelligence’. If this is the case then it is of vital importance that we present young children with activities that will stimulate them and create positive learning experiences; such as those presented by the ‘Sounds and Symbols’ programme. The educational experiences a child is exposed to in the first eight years along with nutrition and physical exercise, can affect mental growth as this is the period for major brain development. A report by Norman (2011) extols the power of music to benefit many areas of life.

Rhymes and songs are often repetitive and those learned in our youth often stay with us forever. The repetitive rhythm of tapping out the syllables in words helps to embed the individual sounds in children’s memories. The physical action involved in beating a drum, clapping hands or tapping claves also helps children to accomplish this important skill.

A child’s development may be divided into five domains - social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional skills. Each of these may be enhanced through participation in musical activities.

🎵 Social Skills

Children are social beings. Children need to learn to socialise and to acquire skills to equip them throughout life. Children also need to have fun and to play. Musical activities provide an ideal opportunity for
children to socialise with others and learn to communicate and co-operate. Active learning in a supported group environment meets the ‘characteristics of effective learning’ as determined by the Early Education guidance material. (Early Education, 2012)

♪ Physical Skills

Music is an ideal way to encourage movement. Music itself can incite us to march, dance or skip. Gross motor skills can be developed through enactment of rhymes, encouraging children to stride like a giant or scamper like a mouse!

Fine motor skills, which are required to manipulate a writing implement, can be strengthened by the playing of percussion instruments such as a triangle or a guiro.

♪ Intellectual Skills

Children learn through experience and observation. They need to practise remembering and recalling events, names, labels and developing vocabulary to describe their environment. They need to learn about number, about comparisons in size and space. They need to be able to sort into sets and to recognise patterns and relationships. They need to learn strategies for problem solving. Songs, rhymes and musical games can help children to learn. Musical stories can help children to comprehend sequences of events and to learn about order.

♪ Creative Skills

Children need time to be creative, to use their imaginations. They can do this through movement, story-telling, music making, as well as through the use of art materials. They need opportunity and encouragement to communicate through these media and to be expressive. Music and movement can encourage self-expression. Provision of a rich environment helps to promote such creativity.

♪ Emotional Skills

The importance of the care we receive in the early years is embodied in Mahler’s separation-individuation theory. In order for a child to become a confident and well balanced individual, Mahler believes that the child must first feel stable and secure and that the mother’s responsiveness is pivotal to development.

The ability to express emotion in the appropriate way and at appropriate times is to be encouraged. Music can help us to express emotion and can provide an outlet for this expression in a supported environment at a group music session.
It is never too early for children to benefit from music. Pre-natal stimulation can lead to enhanced human performance according to Logan et al (1995). Winkler et al (2009) found that newborn infants are able to detect the beat in music.

The early years are the time to develop what Howard Gardner (1985) terms ‘musical intelligence’, the sensitivity to sounds, rhythms, tones and music. The more immersed one is in music the more one can learn about it and through it.

Carl Orff’s method of teaching music to children utilises the natural sense of play to present music through song, dance, drama and percussion instruments, engaging both the mind and body. This synthesis of mind and body is an important one, as the wellbeing of the mind affects the wellbeing of the body.

Kodály believed that if children were taught from an early age then by adulthood their music skills would be second nature. This is probably true of many skills. According to Gardner (1985) people with a strong musical intelligence are likely to have highly developed language skills. Whether the music helps the language or vice versa is not known but they are certainly related. As musical activities can be undertaken first, it is likely that music may assist in the development of language.

Participation in the musical activities of a group enables young children to learn by observation and by trial, experimenting with sound. At pre-school music groups children are likely to be introduced to musical concepts such as pitch, dynamics, tempo, duration and timbre. They will learn to keep time by maintaining a beat or rhythm as well as singing, performing action rhymes and moving to music. They may also learn some musical notation.

Children are able to make use of their own voices and bodies as well as the use of instruments. Being encouraged and praised when participating engenders a feeling of worth and acceptance. Being listened to and listening to others is an important part of music making. Children learn that they have a voice and that it is worthy of attention, also that they should listen to others too. Learning to share is an important part of growing up. A feeling of belonging and of being included is important and of being part of specific groups. During ‘Sounds and Symbols’ sessions, activities are provided to encourage children to interact and to practise their communication skills.

In addition to participation in musical group activities some children learn to play instruments from a very young age. Violins may be played by small children as they are available in many sizes.
Children can often play a tune on a piano or keyboard once they have been shown the order of the notes, although caution should be exercised with regard to the physical toll on developing bones before young children spend excessive time playing an instrument.

**LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT IN THE EARLY YEARS**

Each of the words or phrases highlighted in this section relate to skills required for literacy.

The Early Years Foundation Stage ([DfE 2012](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-2012)) of the revised National Curriculum for 2012 specifies 5 Early Learning Goals:

- **Communication and Language**
  - Listening and Attention
  - Understanding
  - Speaking

And

- **Literacy**
  - Reading
  - Writing

The activities at ‘Sounds and Symbols’ cover the requirements of each of these areas.

**Communication and Language**

*Listening and paying attention* to instructions is vital to education and one which is addressed readily as can be seen in the photographs of the children here. All the activities at ‘Sounds and Symbols’ sessions are engaging, easily undertaken and immensely enjoyable for all participants.

Children learn about and through the language in their environment. They begin to **understand** the sounds around them and their meaning from birth. Exposure to a language-rich environment enables children to assimilate knowledge of these sounds.

Eliot (2000) makes reference to a ‘critical period’ and believes that the critical window for language acquisition, when the brain has maximum capability for absorbing language is up to the age of six or seven years (p363). The optimal part of the critical period is before the age of four. This is also the best time for children to learn foreign languages. Listening to music in other tongues helps children to absorb language easily. Using actions or sign language helps to further consolidate learning; movement helps to commit learning to memory.
Using signs and symbols such as those used in sign language helps to reinforce communication and may offer an alternative form of communication prior to speech development.

**Speaking** is a complex process involving muscular movements of the mouth, tongue and larynx in addition to the processing required by the brain to produce the sounds of our language. Correct pitch, intonation, volume and speed are also necessary for our sounds to be understood by others. Music can help to promote speech development.

Children may sing before they can speak as each skill is governed by a different part of the brain. Smith (2012) reported in the Daily Mirror an amazing story of an autistic boy who although was unable to speak, brought out an album of his singing. Singing has also been used in speech therapy to induce fluency of speech, as illustrated in the film, ‘The King’s Speech’ (Seidler, 2010).

Music is motoric and the use of movement to assist brain function is well documented. At ‘Sounds and Symbols’ sessions, all activities involve movement; whether it be by the whole body or just part of it. This movement serves to assist the embedding of learning.

The more the brain is stimulated the more connections it makes. Children exposed to rich and diverse language experiences will be more capable of using and manipulating language later in life than children with very little exposure to language.

**Literacy**

In order to become literate it is important for children to develop good **speaking and listening skills**. Van Der Gaag (1999) suggested that the possession of good spoken communication skills is a pre-requisite to good written language. Reciting rhymes with children encourages them to listen carefully and to echo back the words they hear. Using different ‘voices’ for example, pretending to be a mouse and speaking in a ‘mouse voice’ or being a lion with a roaring voice and encouraging children to do the same, helps children to make different sounds and to appreciate when using different tones, volumes and pitches is appropriate. The early years are the perfect time for this learning.

**Reading**

In order to develop a good command of oral language it is important that children build a good vocabulary. To do this they need to **appreciate and be aware of their environment** (Smith, 1978). Children also need to be able to comprehend language (Heald and Eustice, 1988). Concepts such as opposites; time - weekdays, seasons; direction; number; sequencing and comparisons are investigated at ‘Sounds and Symbols’
Children need to understand that text has meaning (Meek, 1982) and learn how a book works - the direction of print and the order of the text (Adams 1990).

Children must have a desire to decode text (Moyle, 1968).

There are many skills related to sound which children must acquire in order to be successful at reading. This is because our written language is based upon the correspondence between sound and symbol. Hence, a facility with phonics is vital to the establishment of a strong foundation for literacy.

Through the specially devised musical activities at ‘Sounds and Symbols’ children may learn sound related skills almost osmotically, such as learning to:

- **Maintain a rhythm** – this is important to later syllabification

- **Recognise rhymes** – this is important for learning to divide words into their onsets and rimes. Some rhymes and songs easily lend themselves to the substitution of other words – I call these ‘subs’. For example, ‘Old Macdonald had a farm and on his farm he had a __________.’

- **Identify individual sounds in words** (phonemes) – important for encoding and decoding words

- **Match sounds** – identifying and matching sounds helps children to build phonological awareness – the ability to perceive the sound structure of words.

- **Internalise sounds** – this is the ability to ‘hold’ a sound in your head, to imagine the sound and be able to recall that sound when required.

- **Match sounds to symbols** – In order to read, children need to learn the sounds of the individual alphabet characters. Using alliterative rhymes helps to consolidate the learning of initial letter sounds.

- **Singing along to written text** – Homan et al (2005) found that singing along to written text helps children to become more fluent readers and to learn that text has meaning.

- **Recounting stories** – this helps children to remember facts and details and learn about sequencing. Musical stories help to further assist memory retention.

- **Respond to sound** – children learn to respond appropriately to questions, instructions and to communicate effectively.
It is important that children can **visually discriminate**, ie they need to be able to recognise shapes and identify them.

The common practice of asking children to identify animals and asking what sound they make is a first step towards identifying the shapes and sounds of the alphabet characters of our language.

Last but not least is the development of **memory**. As the brain develops it makes more and more connections (synapses), which it uses to transmit information; active synapses continue to strengthen and inactive ones weaken and are lost. This information is then stored in the memory. Children begin to use memory in a deliberate way as early as three years of age.

**Writing**

In addition to the skills required for reading, in order to write, children need the fine motor control to hold and manipulate a writing implement. Many pre-school activities address these skills for example, colouring, playing with dough, bricks, beads and playing musical instruments.

At ‘Sounds and Symbols’ children learn the movements required to make letter shapes and they have the opportunity to recognise the sounds and patterns of alphabet characters.

Children need to be able to encode words. They need to know the individual sounds within words in order to reproduce the sounds graphically.

The importance of sound to literacy is one of the reasons why 600,000 children in England took phonics tests in June 2012 ([Coldwell et al 2011](#)).

**Summary**

Attendance at a group session where children and adults can work alongside each other fosters family relationships and offers opportunities for children to learn in a supportive and encouraging environment. It can help children to observe cultural formalities, to learn good manners and to learn how to work with others.

Theorists agree that the early years (0-8 years of age) are the most formative, hence, the most important during which to establish a strong foundation for development. It is important that children receive stimulation, nurture and care in the early years in order that they thrive and develop to their maximum potential. During this time children’s minds are most receptive to learning. It is a most important time for development. By the time a child has reached eight years of age they have developed a sense of whom and where they are in their world. Early experiences can be imprinted indelibly and play a major role in a person’s future.

Music provides a natural way to learn and to communicate. Children love songs, being sung to and singing themselves. Young children also revel in expending energy, not only in movement but in being creative and being captivated by the
exhilaration of learning. Playing instruments helps children to investigate how sounds are produced and how they can be made loud or quiet, long or short, high or low, fast or slow. Children may appreciate timbre by showing preference for one instrument over another as its sound may be warmer or stronger. Emotions may be investigated through music and children should be encouraged to describe how particular music makes them feel. Music clearly has a significant role to play in early years development.

References


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