



THE ART OF MUSICAL PLAY

Introduction

Musical play is the child's first language and is a natural part of the life and culture of children. It opens up an imaginative, magical world of possibilities. Musical play activates every part of the brain and promotes healthy brain growth and development. Sensory musical play helps children to listen, express themselves, feel, move, and develop a strong sense of self in relation to others. It structures the moment, helping children to make sense of their world.

The keys to a child's learning are:

- 1) Being calm and alert (controlled by the lower brain).
- 2) Being in happy engagement with adults who value and respect them (controlled by the mid brain).
- 3) Forming memories (including language, literacy and numeracy) through experiencing the world (controlled by the mid brain and cortex).

Predictable musical play activities offer children multiple opportunities to learn, through supporting all three of the above. They engage the whole brain, calming the lower brain, engaging the mid-brain, and stimulating the upper cortex. Music can help us to learn about, and understand, how each child processes the world, and what their movements, words, and ideas tell us about them as learners. Some children find it almost impossible to play a drum slowly because of their high state of arousal. Keep working with calming use of repetition.

The brain is regulated from the bottom up, and this ties into the ascending five note scale C-G (sing up up up up up). The brain can be brought back from high arousal to calm, through the use of the descending G F E D C notes sung slowly back to C (down down down down down).

What do we Include in a Musical Play Session?

Musical play is a powerful tool to help calm and regulate children. Match children's energy levels. If they are excited and aroused, start with a song or dance that is fast, and gradually slow down and match this with a whisper. If the children are low in energy, start slowly, and gradually build up to faster activities.

When children are calm, start with two or three well known songs such as the predictable "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star", which has a clear beginning, middle and end. Start on the note middle C.

Sing within a child's pitch range, from around middle C to the note A. If we sing too high or too low, young children cannot match the pitch range. It is a great idea to have a set of Angel Resonator Bells - a box of eight notes (octave) within the child's pitch range C D E F G A B C. Many children's nursery rhymes are within this pitch range. Vocal gymnastic games are great for extending the vocal pitch range, helping children to sing higher and lower pitches, and to sing tunefully.

Ensure that the musical play is relationship based, with an emphasis on singing, saying, moving and playing together. Use predictable, step-by-step, sung or chanted instructions. This helps children to watch, listen, wait, anticipate, and follow a sequence of actions. Songs can support all daily routines

and help children to remember each sequence of an activity. Use instructional songs as a playful way of helping children to participate and co-operate.

Use songs, nursery rhymes and chants that provide calming predictability, ideas for the upper brain to engage with, and lots of repetition (eg "The Wheels on The Bus", "Row, Row, Row your Boat" and "Here we Go Round the Mulberry Bush"). Repetition helps young children to anticipate and follow a sequence of actions, within the clear beginning, middle and end of a song.

Include turn taking songs, dancing with a partner, and dancing and singing as a group. Sing echo songs to develop tuneful singing and good listening skills. Incorporate songs, dances and games from other cultures. Songs can be sung using babbling sounds, to develop non-verbal and verbal communication.

Include lots of repeated rhythms using the voice, body (clapping, patting, stamping and marching), or a drum. Rhythmic patterns and pitch patterns (chime bars) keep the brain interested and alert. Using a steady, consistent beat with a drum or rainbow ring, provides a regulating, supportive heartbeat rhythm, which engages the lower brain and helps children not to be anxious or over aroused. When we sing or play in time together, we feel connected to each other in the moment. These activities serve the lower and mid brain.

Honour and follow the child's offerings. Sing descriptions of what children are doing in the moment. For example, "I like the way you're playing on the drum, playing on the drum with a rum-tum-tum. I like the way you're playing on the drum, and now get ready to stop". Singing a description of what a child is doing in the moment, validates their ideas for musical play, and supplies the language that describes it.

Use musical questions that hold the children's attention, as they are forced to wait for the musical cadence (the end of the tune). This helps children to watch, wait, listen and anticipate, and their attention and concentration develops. Use play and stop games.

Move fast/slow, high/low, up/down, side to side, sway, and stand on the spot (non locomotor), and use locomotor movement eg spin around, gallop, jump and hop. Leave pauses for children's offerings, and imitate their movement, gestures and sounds, as this promotes creativity and musicality. Use pictures of animals to give children ideas for movement, such as jumping like a kangaroo, snapping like a crocodile, and slithering like a snake. Include finger plays to develop fine and gross motor skills.

Play inside/outside/anywhere, explore sounds and textures, and use natural materials like shells, driftwood, leaves and gum nuts, as well as tuned and untuned, quality sounding percussion instruments. Explore space using hoops, scarves and ribbon sticks.

Use rhyming stories such as "Hairy Maclary from Donaldson's Dairy" by Lynley Dodd. Finish sessions with a calming song, or story, such as Brown Bear. Use a whispering voice, dramatic pauses, much expression, and animation, to draw the children into the story, and a high voice or a low voice to match the characters.

Weave all the strands of learning together through joyful, interactive musical play. When you enjoy the musical play, the children will too.

DEEP PRESSURE TOUCH STIMULATION AND CALMING SONGS

Many of the songs on my CDs are designed to bring children into a place of calm and relaxation. Songs that arouse, then calm, like "Baby Massage" from my CD "Rock-A-Bye Blues" help you and your child to relax and encourage mutual feelings of calm through the use of the beautiful predictable simple melody and deep pressure massage strokes. Deep pressure cuddles using the palms of your hands, (not finger tips) as you hold and cuddle your child, help your child feel safe and secure, helping your child go to sleep.

The science supporting use of deep pressure touch is called Deep Pressure Touch Stimulation (DPTS). Most of us would have been swaddled/wrapped tightly in a blanket at bedtime, and we might then have been rocked gently as our mother/father or grandparent sang us a lullaby. The pressure from being wrapped, rocked, stroked and sung to relaxes the nervous system. This pressure from being wrapped and held in a loving way helps generate serotonin, which then generates melatonin. This is the chemical that tells your system that it is time to rest or sleep.

At the Champion Centre we find that children who are anxious or upset can be calmed through the use of massage, slow singing, or being gently rolled in a mat, covered with a weighted blanket. We all find that at the end of Summer we can sleep more easily when we can once more feel the weight of our duvet or a thick comforting blanket, or wrap ourselves up in a blanket and enjoy a soothing hot drink as we cuddle back into a comfortable chair.

Other strategies that can be used:

The slow, blowing of a bubble, or a feather. This naturally slows our breathing rate. As a child watches, listens to your slow breathing, waits and watches the bubble grow, they learn to become calm and regulated. This is a beautiful, interactive calming activity that can be used as a regular routine after bath-time and before bed-time.

Developing regular daily calming routines such as:

- Singing beautiful songs and playing at bath time. Make this a relaxing fun time to enjoy each other.
- Singing a book of lullabies, nursery rhymes, reading rhythmic stories, rocking together in a rocking chair, singing to your child as they rock on a rocking horse. Rolling a ball slowly back and forth to each other.
- Swinging your child in a swing and singing songs that fit the swinging action.
- At the end of each day take time for deep pressure massage and cuddles before bedtime.

A well regulated child is able to learn and develop cognitive skills because the lower brain is calm and regulated.

For ideas and to find out more about musical play go to juliewyliemusic.com and [facebook.com/Juliewyliemusic](https://www.facebook.com/Juliewyliemusic).