

A few notes about music and babies

The babies arrived at the Early Years Centre in all kinds of ways ?in strollers, in car-seats, in the arms of a parent or grandparent. Some infants had drifted off, flickering smiles playing on their sleepy lips. Others were wide-eyed with wonder at seeing so many other babies together. For many this was the first organized group these babies had attended and, as we sang songs and rhymes and shared books, these babies fixated on their parents and other babies like moths to light.

What is it about the simple act of singing that is so engaging to babies? We know that singing songs and lullabies creates a playful, comforting, or gentle tone that is important for bonding and attachment between babies and their parents or caregivers. It sets the stage for babies to be receptive to language and literacy learning.

Singing also slows the speed of oral language, making it easier for babies to distinguish and imitate speech. Through rhythm and rhyme, singing emphasizes that words are made up of smaller sounds. Syllables, beginning, middle and ending sounds are so much easier to distinguish in the word ?twinkle?, for example, when it is sung in ?Twinkle Twinkle Little Star,? than when spoken quickly. Bouncing rhymes sung to babies helps them feel the beats in words and hear the rhyming patterns. Children need well developed phonological skills (ability to recognize the smaller sounds in words) to understand how to link these speech sounds with letters or letter combinations. Songs, especially when they are sung often and become familiar, cultivate this skill.

Listening skills are building blocks for learning language, learning how to read and write, and for lifelong learning. Once in school, studies show that students spend 50 to 75 per cent of classroom time listening to teachers, other students, or media. (Smith, 1992) Despite the frequency of listening activity, listening skills are rarely explicitly taught. We assume that, because we're talking, children are listening. The fact is, good listening skills require instruction. Music provides a fun way to listen for sound, silence, emotion, instruments, rhythm, and words.

This does not mean, however, that it helps babies and children to have music playing in the background all the time. Whether its radio, iPod, or television, continuous sound teaches children to tune out and to stop listening so that they can attend to other things. Background noise can also confound young children's abilities to hear differences in speech sounds, especially for children who have delays in their language or speech development.

Facing their babies, the parents at the baby group began singing again. The words were new, but the Frère Jacques tune familiar. They each held a scarf to play peek-a-boo:

Where are you hiding? Where are you hiding? (Each parent held a scarf in front of their baby's face.)

I can't see you! I can't see you!

Are you here or there? Are you here or there?

Peek-a-boo! Peek-a-boo! (Each parent suddenly lowered their scarf for baby to see them.)

The parents and babies smiled and laughed and, yes, we sang it again.

Susan Ramsay, Early Literacy Specialist (Hastings, Lennox & Addington, and Frontenac Counties)

sramsay@klandskills.ca