

Modelling language through music and singing.

The magic of communicative musicality!

This blog was written by Jade Hartley, Senior Advanced Teaching Assistant at Childhaven Nursery School in Scarborough.



Jade has worked with Early Years for over 20 years. Having worked in a variety of settings, including being a childminder, Jade is passionate about developing early language skills.

At Childhaven Nursery School we promote singing and music throughout our nursery day. Musical and singing experiences with children promote all aspects of children's development, including communication and language, personal, social and emotional, physical, creative and cognitive.

Musical interactions are not just about singing or music, they often include patterns of focused verbal and non-verbal exchanges. These may be in the form of gestures, facial expressions, body language and changes in vocal pitch, tone and rhythm which convey messages and feelings. This is referred to as 'communicative musicality'.

Children who find it difficult to communicate verbally often enjoy listening and responding to musical interactions.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Evidence store states: "There is strong evidence that teaching and modelling vocabulary to children in the early years can have a positive effect on their oral language skills." So why not use music as a form of teaching vocabulary through everyday play experiences?

How does this look in practice?

Singing together does not need to be at any set time. Why not sing alongside a child while they play and observe their response?



Instruments and sound makers are readily available for our children to use and access independently. In the photograph above, a couple of children began by showing an interest in the pots, pans and kitchen utensils. One child realised that using the metal spoons against the pan made a really great sound. Another child was a little reserved and was observing the little boy make more and more sounds. The adult was close by and began to model the sounds and interactions; talking, singing, using the pans to make a noise and sing favourite songs waiting patiently for a response. A step at a time the child mirrored the beats made by the drums and key language was repeated until a group of children joined in. The songs were repeated as requested several times until all the children were moving, talking and singing to the songs using the items available.

The EYFS (2023) states; "Children learn new vocabulary through music," and highlights how children will "listen attentively, move to and talk about music, expressing their feelings and responses." The EYFS refers to 'Music Development Matters in the Early Years by Nicola Burke' which emphasises various aspects to musical learning and development, one of these aspects is 'vocalising and singing.'

Let's have a look at another photograph which demonstrates the simplicity of modelling music and movement:



A child, exploring the instruments in the outdoor area. He takes an instrument one at a time and makes sounds by tapping over and over again. He takes a drum and begins to bang the instrument; the adult also takes a drum. The adult mirrors the sounds back to the child. He smiles and continues to make more sounds. "Duke York!" he shouts to the adult. "Yes great idea, lets sing together".

The adult begins to sing 'The Grand Old Duke of York', banging her drum and marching around the gazebo. The child happily copies and joins in, marching, tapping the drum and singing. The song is repeated over and over again, and more children join in. The adult pauses for the child to sing key words in the song and slows the song down as well as her movements and words, and the child copies. The child is engaged, takes a lead, and uses lots of vocabulary through music and singing!

Music can be made using other items not just instruments through everyday play these can be referred to as 'sound makers'. Adults can encourage children to make sounds by using everyday items. Saucepans and buckets are great fun and can help children explore making a big sound. Flowerpots and wooden beaters, metal kitchen utensils; there is so much to explore. Gentle sounds can be produced by the crinkly plastic inners of chocolate or biscuit boxes, children love to make shakers from cartons with varying amounts of sand, pebbles or pasta. Words can be sung slowly and repeated alongside making music with any objects you have available in your setting, just model and encourage involvement!



How can I build music into daily play to develop language and vocalisation?

- Make up your own songs about what you are doing, where you are going, who and what you might see. It helps children to understand the world and prepare for joining in with plans. Dance, sway and bounce in time.
- Listen to all the sounds the children make and copy them back. Wait and listen for their response. Repeat!

The 'Music Development Matters Document' also suggests various ways to promote language through music within practice, these include:

- Encourage and support the inventive ways in which children vocally improvise and merge songs together.
- Copy children's vocalisations to show that you hear and value them.
- Use your voice in a range of ways and play with the way you sing songs, for example sing quietly, slowly, sadly, joyfully.
- Be interested in the children's individual songs and talk to them about what they mean to them.
- Repeat songs; children learn songs through repetition.
- Create song stories with children, for example offer them a first line of a song and ask them to continue the song.
- Provide resources in the environment that encourage singing and vocal play such as cardboard tubing that children can vocalise into, microphones.
- Provide song boxes filled with interesting items to spark children's imaginative song ideas.

Most of all ... have fun, join in and encourage. Model, model and MODEL!



Time to reflect on your own practice...

- Do children have access to musical instruments and sound makers to experiment and play with sound?

- Are there opportunities every day for children to sing songs and learn nursery rhymes so that they become familiar with the tunes for these?
- Is the importance of using music to support language development shared throughout the staff team?
- Do you sing along side children through everyday play?
- Do you get involved, move, dance and sing at any time of the day and encourage those less confident children to participate?

Remember:

Singing helps children to develop fluency of oral communication skills. It offers an opportunity to be vocal in a controlled way and helps children to listen attentively and to produce a variety of sounds. It is so important to ensure that music and singing is part of everyday practice.

Reflect on the use of music in your setting and consider how your practice could be enhanced through the art of music and singing!

References

Musical Development Matters in the Early Years, By Nicola Burke (2018)

Early years foundation stage (EYFS) statutory framework (2024)

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years-evidence-store/communication-and-language?approach=teaching-and-modelling-vocabulary>