

pick up & play

Susan Young continues her exploration of early years music with a look at the value of instruments and other sound-makers...

In a daycare group caring for one- to two-year-olds, the staff have strung up a rope across a corner of their outdoor play space and from this line suspended a number of interesting sound-makers: plastic drinking bottles filled with fine grained materials for shaking; two twists of heavy duty sleigh bells; and two sets of thick bamboo chimes. The children explore different ways of playing



the instruments and sound makers. The suspended instruments seem to encourage larger body movements, swinging and jumping to play them or running back and forth to strike them on the move.

In another part of the outdoor area they've laid out a blanket and on it placed some wooden instruments – mostly for tapping with small handled wooden beaters. On the carpet one child is concentrating on playing two-tone woodblocks with the beaters and listening very carefully to the different sounds they produce. Seeing his interest, one of the practitioners finds a larger woodblock. The child becomes interested in this new sound, going back and forth between the different instruments and setting them out on the carpet in a row to tap along in sequence.

In these articles about early years music I'm emphasising the idea of music as a form of self-initiated play that's integrated into the everyday and ongoing activity of the early years setting. Here I've illustrated this idea with a daycare setting and younger children, but the idea of setting out instruments for children to explore and play with freely is a familiar one in most early years provision. So familiar, you may think, that I can just mention it and move on to other ways of using instruments in more structured activities. But all too often a few instruments are set out for children to explore on their own and it's left at that. The activity usually remains at a low-level with little or no adult intervention to extend and enrich it. Notice how the practitioner in the small daycare scenario noticed the child's interest in wooden sounds and introduced another woodblock to extend



that play. Thought needs to be given to what kinds of instruments are provided, where and how they are set out and how adults might extend the children's play with them.

The EYFS gives little helpful guidance since it mainly refers to children 'exploring sounds' or making simple rhythm patterns but gives little suggestion for how these first stage activities might extend and become more demanding and interesting.

At first

Being able to grip an object and tap or shake it is one of the first object-focused experiences for babies. Once they discover the sound they can make, they repeat the action – often again and again and with a regular pulse. Babies will be fascinated by sounds that are made for them to listen to and should be introduced to a wide variety of instruments and different things that make interesting sounds such as crinkly paper, tinkling cutlery, metal kitchenware and so on.

Then

As they develop more coordination, very young children will be able to manage simple educational percussion instruments that make sounds through shaking, tapping, plucking and scraping. They can manage beaters and enjoy playing larger barred educational instruments such as xylophones. The quality of sound remains important. They can take part in turn-taking play with instruments with an adult partner.

And later

Children enjoy playing a wide variety of instruments and different types of sound-maker, played in different kinds of ways. They can also be introduced to technological sound sources such as sound mats and keyboards. They will make their own spontaneous music.

A sound investment

Encourage musical expression with these essential instruments and sound-makers...

- Wooden xylophone and four sets of beaters (eight in total) – some soft, felt and some harder rubber
- Tongue drum or 'top slit' drum
- Set of bongos (ideally two sets: Remo make jungle drums and bongos)
- Two sets of Indian bells
- Two-tone woodblocks, swirl-xylo, two large wood blocks
- Collection of small egg shakers or egg shaker maracas

And for younger children add:

- Attractive basket filled with small, baby-safe shakers – egg shakers, small maracas etc.
- Gathering drum (Remo percussion)
- Wave or ocean drum

Nb. Order instruments individually from a music education supplier rather than a general supplier of early years equipment; the choice will be far greater and the quality better.

Spontaneous music with instruments

Early childhood educators know to value children's own made visual artwork. They know that the blobs, swirls of paint and pencil squiggles are early forms of visual creativity. However, the same attention and value is rarely given to children's own made music. It too is made up of sounding blobs, swirls and squiggles – patterns that often arise from body movements, or the shape of the instrument, or rhythm patterns, but it's rarely considered to be a valuable form of early musical creativity. I think this is the reason the EYFS talks of 'exploring sounds' instead of 'exploring music'. Believing that children can do very little musically without lots of support, adults refer to their own spontaneous music as merely 'sounds' and try to structure children's first efforts at



find out more

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faced he stretches out his hand to take the bells. Trish models for him how to hold them so that he can produce the same clear ringing. They both wait for the sound to fade. Trish picks up her second set of bells. She waits, he looks, she plays them. The sound is a slightly different pitch to the first set. You can almost see the concentrated listening and thinking as the boy realises the sound is very similar, but just a bit different.

This short example of more structured practice shows Trish modeling how to hold, strike and listen to the sound of the Indian bells. The whole sequence proceeded without her saying a word. All too often practitioners feel the need to talk, name and tell, when silent modelling and listening best creates an atmosphere of focused listening. Trish develops this small activity by introducing the second set of bells which she knows has just a slightly different pitch – and so sets him this small challenge. Encouraging and supporting children to play instruments so that they sound well by using the correct hold, playing them cleanly and then listening carefully to the sound is one important aspect of working with instruments.

(Thanks to Trish Keelan, St Thomas Children's Centre, Birmingham.)

making music with instruments and introduce simple activities such as making up short rhythms or repeating ideas. In the video example that accompanies the current version of the EYFS, rather than illustrating children's vibrant musical creativity, it shows them engaged in finding very simple rhythms and repeating them.

Two things are important. First is good equipment that's well set out. No one is inspired to make interesting music with poor instruments, so go for quality over quantity. Two sets of good quality bongos set out on the carpet area for two days of the week will engender much more interesting music play than a scruffy box of instruments that permanently sits in a corner of the room. The second important thing is the interest and attention of adults. All too often adults ignore children's play with the instruments because they have low expectations of it. As a result children quickly learn that it's not a valued activity, and low-level activity is all that results.



Approaches to practice

Trish is working with a two-and-a-half-year-old boy at a drop-in session. She has brought two sets of heavy quality Indian bells. She waits until the boy is looking at her, and then 'tings' one set of bells, just once. They produce a clear, beautiful ringing sound. The boy just looks – and listens – his eyes intent on Trish and the bells. When the sound has

Worth a listen

Treat your children's ears with these musical resources...

A good cause

Get children moving and raise money for meningitis research with these Boogie Fit Fun Packs. For £5, you get a DVD of songs and dance routines, sponsorship forms, balloons and other props, plus information on meningitis symptoms. Call 01454 281814 or visit www.meningitis.org/boogiefit



£18.95, by leading children's writers. It features 12 songs designed to make learning about numbers and shapes great fun for children aged 3–7 years. Visit outoftheark.co.uk

Talented toddlers

Hold a talent show anywhere in your setting with this colourful stage backdrop (MES0871, £47.95)! Hang inside or outdoors and get your children to perform. Extra pop star accessories are available from www.mesdirect.com



Adult partner play

One way to develop good quality play with children with instruments, then, is to pay attention to it and listen – and then to respond and join in as a play partner. I developed this approach in a research project I carried out 10 years ago. My first plan had been simply to watch and observe how children played with instruments in a music area. But I soon found that when I sat by and listened with obvious interest to what children were doing, they



Musical maths

Out of the Ark Music's *I Love Maths* is a book and CD combo, priced at