

Exeter University's **Susan Young** looks at vocal-based musical activities across the birth to five age range...

# Playing WITH music

**I**n early years practice, music is still largely a group activity in which the adult takes a strong lead and the children join in songs, with perhaps actions and instrument-playing activities included. The idea of music as a play-based activity might be provided for with instruments set out in a music area for children to explore on their own, but often with little adult intervention and little guided progression. Over the course of four articles I will be saying that music is an area where children can and should be able to contribute their own musical ideas, to play with and be creative with music and its basic materials of timing, sound quality, melody, rhythm, phrasing and form.

## Children's voices

*Alison has made a tent from an old net curtain in one area of the main nursery room where three-year-olds are playing. Inside she has two large cardboard boxes. The children's own play idea is to crawl inside, close the lid and be 'posted'. All the while both Alison and the children are making up posting songs for each child in turn. They then go and fetch her guitar, and request she sing a well-known song – still inside the tent. The guitar needs tuning so they listen and wait while she turns the pegs. Alison encourages them to listen to the pitch and how tuning the string changes the pitch and to 'twang' their voices in the same way. They all go on to sing the song together, and take turns to strum the chords.*

*(With thanks to Alison Harmer and the Music Mushrooms Team, Gloucestershire.)*

Practitioners in the nursery where Alison was working quickly picked up on the idea of making up songs to accompany all kinds of activities – encouraging the children to make up songs too – or using voices in playful expressive ways. Simply suggesting that children 'make up a song' will usually produce spontaneous singing. Notice too how when there is an opportunity for some focused listening to the pitch of the guitar strings or echo-singing, Alison encourages the children to practise their vocal pitch-matching. Alison recorded the children's individual spontaneous singing as MP3 files which could then be sent home to parents via email.

## At first...

When babies are born they are able to perceive tiny variations in the voices around them. They already know their mother's voice, having heard it in the womb. They start to explore their voices around 2–4 months and go on to explore rhythmic syllable sounds and little vocal melodic ideas, often called babbling. This is not just the start of language but the start of spontaneous singing too.





## Sound Ideas

FIND INSPIRATION FOR MORE MUSIC-BASED ACTIVITIES FROM THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES...

- **Lori** – book and CD of South Asian lullabies in Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Brij/Urdu and Gujarati, with translations available from [www.sampad.org.uk](http://www.sampad.org.uk)

- The music one-to-one project explored approaches to working with mothers and babies or very young children through songs and musical activities. The website includes the report, ideas for activities and some

downloadable pages that can be used in practice. <http://education.exeter.ac.uk/music-one2one>

- *Music with the Under Fours*, by Susan Young, describes children's musical development, including vocal development, and provides descriptions of approaches to practice. *Music 3-5* focuses on that age phase, but again has a chapter on using voices. Both books are published by RoutledgeFalmer.

- *Three Rapping Rats – making music with traditional stories* by Kaye Umansky. These stories have ideas for using voices and instruments in improvised ways. (A & C Black)

- *Voiceplay* by Linda Bance and Alison Street – 22 songs with activities which include, as the title suggests, ideas for voice play. (Oxford University Press)

- **Singup** – a national programme to support singing for school-age children, but many Singup areas include activities for early years. Area coordinators can advise on training days or suggest singers to visit your setting. Visit [www.singup.org](http://www.singup.org)



**“The problem is that using voices in music has become associated with reproductive activity – just copying songs sung for them – rather than children making up songs”**

SUSAN YOUNG

### Then...

When children are a bit older they start to learn to talk, of course, but they also use their voices expressively to communicate. They can start to sing, often flowing their voices freely over a wide pitch range, but can also sing short patterns of vowel sounds that begin to sound like songs they are hearing and know. Spontaneous singing often accompanies their play, when they are concentrating on small toys, for example.

### And later...

Children learn to sing and to pitch their voices with more control so that they can match songs they hear and sing in time and in tune

with others. As they learn to control their voices they may not have a very wide pitch range and may need to sing quite slowly in order to manage words and melody together. At the same time, they continue to make up songs – sometimes using bits of songs they already know, altering them and adding to them, sometimes singing the free-flow melodies that are often wordless, and making up rhythmic vocal plays to accompany other forms of movement or dramatic play with toys.

### Playing with voices

The mother speaks to the baby in a typical way called 'motherese' in which she makes her voice rise and fall more than usual, gives it



**Take time to consider these two key areas...**

**Links with home**

First interviews with parents settling their babies in to daycare often ask if they have a favourite song, particularly if their day will include a sleep period. Recordings of these songs, soothing songs for going to sleep, and the parents speaking to the children can be woven in to practice.

Parents can be asked about their home musical activities and invited to contribute their song to the setting. One mother in a London setting sang professionally as a jazz singer and visited to read stories to children, vocalising to animate parts of the story, jazz-style. Another mother knew several South Asian Lori and came in to sing them to the children, who were encouraged to make up their own lullabies later in the day to put soft toys to sleep.

**Links with the EYFS**

Read the EYFS requirements carefully and you will see that although music is included in 'creative development', the expectation is that the more imaginative, exploratory activity, particularly when children are older, will be with instruments and dance, and that children will simply 'learn some songs'.

Being creative with voices is one of the most direct and expressive ways for children to be musically creative, and it certainly doesn't require any special resources. The problem is that using voices in music has become associated with reproductive activity – just copying songs sung for them – rather than children making up songs or using their voices creatively.

short phrases and a kind of slower, regular rhythm to it. This she does intuitively, but it enables the baby to cue in to the mother's communication and understand the emotion and quality of it – even if not exactly what is being said.

As they get older, young children enjoy adults singing small ditties to accompany daily activities. Adults might make up a little song to accompany nappy changing, a shared song about getting shoes on, play with swooping voices as they swing back and forth on outdoor equipment or sing a quiet croon as they settle to sleep. Adults who use their

voices expressively when they interact and play with children – to speak, chant, rap, sing – will encourage children to be similarly expressive and communicative. Communication is about all of these things, not just having a vocabulary of words.

**Ideas and strategies**

Using voices musically and song-singing takes many different forms for different purposes. Sing improvised (made up) or known songs to:

- Celebrate and come together: *Happy Birthday*, greeting songs.

- Accompany and structure games and movement: traditional ring games, movement and action songs.
- Support a change of mood, pace or activity: calming down songs, songs for keeping children active on a walk.
- Add to a story or role-play.

In all these activities there may be opportunities, particularly with older children, to focus their attention on how they are using their voices to match and change pitch and what the music is doing – whether the pitch is going up or down, by step or jump, for example.

**Music to your ears**  
**TN SUGGESTS THREE TUNEFUL RESOURCES...**

**Let's dance!**  
**Bubbles Music and Bubbles Dance provide a clear, skills-based route to creative development. Each file contains a CD of music tracks and a CD-ROM of extra resources, and comprises 12 units incorporating popular early years themes, with clear references to other areas of learning. Practitioners and children alike will enjoy the fun activities. bubbleseducation.co.uk info@bubbleseducation.co.uk**



**Sing us a story**  
**The Song & Story series of books and CDs by Niki Davies for Out of the Ark Music are a great resource for introducing singing. Traditional, well-loved stories are retold using a simple script and bite-size songs that are perfect for nursery-aged children to sing along with. outoftheark.com 01932 232 250**



**Here come the drums**  
**The new music-making centres from Drums for Schools encourage social and physical development, making them perfect for exploring sound-making and inter-personal skills. drumsforschools.co.uk 0115 931 4113**



**Providing for singing play**

The most obvious provision for singing is the easiest and cheapest – simply for practitioners to sing frequently, with enjoyment and without inhibition themselves. This may be easier said than done, especially as many adults have grown up believing themselves to be non-singers or to be self-conscious of their voices. In my experience, in settings where singing is a relaxed and easy activity, everyone starts to pick up on that climate and joins in.

Recordings of songs and singers set out for children to listen to are another good way to enrich the environment, as are video clips of performances played on an interactive whiteboard. Be sure to vary the range of styles and include opera, folk, jazz, 'world' musics and pop. Asking performing singers to visit the setting can be quite easy to achieve: various organisations will assist settings in finding professional musicians who regularly work with young children.

Microphones for singing songs can prompt children to sing, from the simplest plastic type to microphones connected to digital recorders or small voice recording devices of which there are many to choose from.