



Simple songs that kids can simply sing

Makes Me Want To Sing - Improving Your Child's Speech and Language Skills through Music

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Have you ever watched a group of pre-school children dance and sing to their favorite rendition of “The Wheels on the Bus” or “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star?” With a song in their hearts, children show freedom in their movement, smiles on their faces, and uninhibited singing that most adults would do only in the shower. There is something about music that seems to capture the very essence of who children are. What draws them to sing and enjoy music so much? What do they learn from listening to and participating in music? Can such a wonderful tool as music be used to help other areas of development?

Researchers have been studying the effects of music on the brain and how the brain is activated through music. Although studies have only touched the tip of the iceberg, there appears to be consensus that music engages the entire brain and improves communication between the two hemispheres of the brain. Can we then assume that music can be used to improve other cognitive skills such as language, speech, mathematical skills, or abstract reasoning? The research shows promise and certainly gives incentive to continue studying the effects of music on the brain and on learning.

As an educational speech-language pathologist working with speech- and language-delayed toddlers and pre-school children, I am constantly looking for tools that will help even one child learn to talk. Music is one such tool that I use frequently in my work with young children. Whether a child is developing normally or showing delays, music can be used to enhance speech and language skills.

Although there are distinct differences between speech and singing, there are also striking similarities. These similarities are never as obvious as when adults speak to infants. We seem to know innately that babies respond more consistently and favorably if we speak with higher pitch, larger pitch variations, rhythmic sing-song and extended vowels. All of these musical adjustments in our speech create a “talking symphony” that infants find delightful. They become more attentive and engaged.

With all of the positive contributions that music can provide, I am not sure we are utilizing this tool to its full potential, especially with young children who are just learning to talk or with those who are having difficulty learning speech and language.

Think back to the children singing and dancing to their favorite songs. In any group of children, invariably there are a few who are not singing at all. Some of them may be shy

or inhibited. They may prefer to sing the songs later in the privacy of their own home, where they are more comfortable. Some children, however, do not have a choice at all. They may be unable to participate because the complexity of those beloved pre-school songs is above their verbal ability. The articulation skills required to pronounce the words may be too complex. The grammar and vocabulary of the song may be too complex. The songs may be going too fast. The sentences may be too long. And so they sit and just observe. Certainly just listening to music has a positive effect, but there is no substitute for the verbal practice that occurs while a child sings or talks.

Children just learning to talk or children with speech and language delay benefit from imitating sounds, words, and phrases. They also need exposure to the give-and-take of a conversation. Because these tasks are difficult for some children, they may avoid participating in the very thing that will improve their skills. This avoidance only contributes to the problem of limited verbal skills, and so the cycle continues.

What can we, as parents and educators, do to break this cycle of silence and entice children to practice the very thing that they find too difficult? If music is potentially such an important tool for learning, then how can we use it to reach the children who may benefit the most?

In my years of working with children, I have seen music effectively break the ice for those who are unable to verbally communicate. The songs, however, need to be adapted and the presentation adjusted to fit the needs of each child. After years of trial and error, I have found techniques that help children participate musically, and consequently improve their speech at the same time. These techniques can be helpful for children of any age, whether your child is developing normally or showing delays.

Techniques that make children want to sing and talk

1. **Sing whatever your child can already say.** Sing in a manner that is possible for your child to imitate. Know your child and the verbal skills he has. If your child has no words or just a few, then singing in sentences will probably not result in your child singing along. If getting your child to verbalize is your goal, begin by singing words or sounds that are at your child's verbal level. You may need to put inflection, rhythm, and sing-song into more reflexive noises such as sneezing, coughing, smacking lips or making car noises. You may want to put inflection and sing-song into simple vowels, consonants, and consonant-vowel structures. You don't need to sing actual songs. Make them up as you go. Use developmentally simple consonants such as p, b, m, n, h, w, t, and d. They are usually the easier ones for children to imitate, however this does not always hold true. Just be watchful of what your child can say, and go from there.

One of the most delightful examples I remember was with a little 2-year-old boy and his father. One day, his father proudly shared that he and his son had learned a new song. Having worked with this little boy for awhile, I knew his verbal ability and I doubted that he could sing along because he had no ability yet to say words. The

father proceeded to start singing the 70's disco song, "Staying Alive." The little boy responded at exactly the right time by singing, "Ah, ah, ah, ah," followed by his father singing, "Staying alive, staying alive." The verbal skill of this youngster was limited primarily to simple vowels, but his father intuitively knew how to involve him in a song. That was the day I fully realized the power of music and how parents can use it to interact with their children and also teach them at the same time.

2. **Sing about what your child loves or about regular routines of the day.** Children learn best when they are interested in the topic. For example, if your child loves car rides, take advantage of that, and begin putting inflection and sing-song in simple words related to that activity. Sing something like, "My car, car, car. Beep. Beep. Beep." When your child is sitting at the table ready to eat, try naming all of the food and utensils in a sing-song manner and see what kind of response your child gives you. Sing about bath time, swinging in the park, or blowing bubbles. The list is as endless as the things your child loves to do.
3. **Sing repetitively and in chains of 3.** Children do not seem to be bored with repetition. Quite the contrary, repetition seems to heighten attention and interest. Repeat the words over and over, not unlike the great rock and roll songs of the past. Many great songwriters write simple words and phrases that are often repeated in chains of 3. This technique makes me want to sing with them because of the simplicity of it. That same technique works for small children, and seems to entice them to imitate.
4. **My turn. Your turn.** Make a conscious invitation to your child to participate. Let him know that this is not a parent solo concert, but a duet that requires turn-taking. After singing your favorite rendition to "Ba, ba, ba" or whatever else you find easy, enticing, and amusing, use the phrase, "Your turn," and give a look of anticipation as you WAIT for your child to take his singing turn. If your child cannot verbally participate yet, continue working on the concept of taking verbal-singing turns. You can do this by sharing a pretend microphone (hollow cardboard tube). Begin singing some simple sounds into the tube. A tube amplifies the sounds and often entices children to try vocalizing. Give the tube to your child and again say, "Your turn," and then WAIT. If your child is not yet ready to verbalize in that way, continue the process of taking turns by sharing a shaker or a stick to pound a drum, or taking turns "giving each other 5." Do not sing or talk during your child's turn. You want the turn-taking to mimic a conversation.
5. **Sing slowly.** Children who are learning to talk need speech presented to them at a slower rate. Their developing mouths simply cannot keep up with the precision of an adult mouth. Singing slowly, pausing frequently, and waiting will give children the idea that they can keep up vocally.
6. **Put excitement in the way you sing and say things, and be observant as to what entices your child.** Keep in mind what infants pay attention to when adults talk to them: higher pitch, greater variation in inflection, extending the vowel sounds, and

exaggerating the sounds and words. If your child has ever responded to an imitation task, or a song, what were the secrets that made that imitation happen? Was it the exaggeration or extension of the vowel and consonant sounds? Was it the intense variations in your inflection? Was it the fact that you waited and gave your child time to respond, or was it the movement in your body while you were saying sounds? Be observant of what occurs, analyze it, and try to duplicate it. These techniques may be different for every child. A “whispered” song may entice one child, where a loud, intense song may entice another. The most important thing is to be playful with your words and sounds. This is not the time to be inhibited.

7. **Sing to music that is instrumental only or simplify those songs that are pre-school favorites.** If there are no words in a recording, you can still sing along. Sing whatever your child is capable of verbally producing, and occasionally give the invitation to take a turn. If some of those beloved pre-school songs are favorites to listen to, choose a target word of the song, and sing that throughout the song. That will give your child the idea that singing along is OK no matter what you are able to produce. Remember that there is no substitute for singing with your child. Recorded music will usually be more effective if you participate with your child and make it a warm and fun interaction.
8. **Use gestures while you’re singing, but observe whether the motions enhance or inhibit singing.** I have found that movement can sometimes entice singing, but can also detract from singing as well. I use gestures and movements that seem to directly relate to the sound or word I’m singing. I keep the movements simple so that children who have difficulty coordinating motor movements will not have to concentrate on doing a complex gross motor task and verbalize at the same time. It’s the old statement, “You can’t do two things at once,” that sometimes holds true. If the gross motor movement requires concentration for the child, then it is unlikely to be a tool to increase singing. If the movement is natural, automatic, and easy, then by all means use that in combination with singing. Motions that are close to your mouth help to give your child the added cues that focus on the face. Tapping out the syllables on your child’s leg as you sing is another motor movement that gives additional cues as to what you are singing.
9. **Put natural phrases in a musical form.** Words and phrases such as, “Where are you?” “Hello,” “Knock knock,” and “Ready, set, go,” are some of the first phrases a child will sing or say because they can be exaggerated in inflection and combined with motor movements. Sing these phrases when a situation arises to use them, and see if your child responds when you anticipate his turn.

Anything can be a song, and a song can reach and teach a child better than most treasures on earth. My hope is that all parents can follow the advice of the famous opera composer, Gioacchino Antonio Rossini, who once said, “Give me a laundry list, and I’ll set it to music.” Put music in your voice and a child-like song in your heart in virtually everything you do from driving the car to doing laundry. Your child is sure to benefit from all of

your musical efforts. You don't have to compose operas to compose beautiful music that will touch the heart of your child.

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If you have any questions, e-mail Rachel at kids@expresstrain.org. You can also go to the Kids' Express Train website at www.expresstrain.org for more information about KET products and seminars.