

Active participation in music-making can greatly improve the capacity of very young children to develop language and mathematical skills, according to new research commissioned by the music charity, Youth Music. The report, launched earlier this month at LSO St Luke's in London, is called *Turning their ears on ... keeping their ears open* and is written by Helen Taylor and Jim Clark, two early learning experts from Northumbria University. It is based on their observations of the impact on very young children of 'regular, structured, active and creative music-making led by an expert musician with skills in working with children under five over an extended period of time.'

In introducing their research, Taylor and Clark are at pains to emphasise that their findings should not in any way be confused with the so-called Mozart Effect. 'The notion has arisen that if you get kids listening to music, it is going to make them better and brighter people, which is not the case,' says Clark. 'A lot of myths and legends have grown up around this notion and we step into this world with a great deal of caution. There is no doubt that being involved in music can be a magical experience but does it have magical powers? I reserve my judgment. There's some impact but we do not have the tools to measure or explain how that impact occurs.'

The origin of the Mozart Effect dates back to research done some 13 years ago which found that passive listening to music affected in a positive manner college students' ability to complete a spatial test. This research was misinterpreted by the press to mean that passive listening to music could make children 'smarter', say Taylor and Clark, whereas subsequent extensive experimentation with children has found no evidence to substantiate the claim. However, later research did establish that active involvement in a structured music curriculum had a noticeably positive effect on young children, an outcome now confirmed by Taylor and Clark.

Their brief from Youth Music was to find out how music can help prepare children for primary school and to test to see if skills in numeracy and literacy of pre-school-age children are improved by music-making activities. Before assessing the value of music to the wider curriculum, Taylor and Clark point out that music and the other arts have their own value regardless of whether or not they have an impact on other areas of learning. 'We should be careful of doing the arts a disservice,' they stress, 'by trying to make a case for their existence because of the way they may support development in other fields.'

Nevertheless, they conclude from their research that regular weekly or fortnightly contact over a two-year period between a musician and very young children does impact on several areas of these children's development. They base their conclusions on research into two specially commissioned music projects for children under five, which focused on the Riverside Early Excellence Centre in North Tyneside and the Sure Start Priory Children's Centre in Great Yarmouth. There they found that the children's experience of music 'supported development in communication and language skills' in a variety of ways. It increased vocabulary, the amount and quality of speech and the ability to listen and respond to spoken instructions, and it developed greater control of the voice.

Regular contact with the musicians was also found 'to support the children's mathematical development of skills and understanding'



Above (l-r): Christine Coker, Naomi Eisenstadt – Secretary of State's Chief Advisor for Children's services at DfES, Teresa and Jasmine Meek

Left (l-r): Michelle and Elliot James, with Liz MacClarnon



## Early start

Robin Stringer reports on new research into how music can positively influence the formative years of a child's development

ships not only with children but also with carers and parents. That contact was considered so important by the two projects involved in this study that they are actively seeking ways to fund a full-time post for a musician to provide regular music sessions in Sure Start locations and to help the early years workers plan suitable environments in which to learn music.

The countrywide shortage of properly trained staff, whether musicians or early years workers, is proving a stumbling block in attempts by Youth Music and other privately-run organisations to expand provision for the under-fives. Hence Youth Music's aim over the next five years to fund the training of 600 early years practitioners in music leading skills and of 300 musicians in the ways of working with very young children.

The training programmes are part of a £9.4m investment programme, directed particularly at those living in areas of social and economic need and designed to fund music-making activities for a minimum of 100,000 children under five by 2010. They mark a continuation of the organisation's support for music-making for the under-fives which began in 2000 and has so far funded 186 programmes around the country including 13 projects in Sure Start Children's Centres. As Youth Music's determined chief executive, Christina Coker, says: 'We are targeting the under-fives because this is the key time to embed music in the lives of all children.'