

Early music

Babies as young as four months are being introduced to music. Is it just a bit of fun, or are there lasting benefits? Kevin Stephens takes his granddaughter along to find out

When my granddaughter, at four months, began to attend a group called, optimistically, Singing Babies, I began to take notice. When I attended my first session I was inspired. The babies failed to sing, of course, but the mums, one dad, one granddad and one nanny more than made up for it. The babies, aged 4-14 months, made plenty of noise as well and were really focused throughout.

But when I found out just how much of this so-called 'early years' music work is going on across the country, and how effective it all is, I was astonished. And it all seems to have blossomed under the radar over the last ten years or so. In 1997 I was mildly interested to learn that Folkworks, the national agency for traditional music, now fully integrated into the management team at The Sage Gateshead, was experimenting with sessions for pre-school children. In 2007 you can't move for active groups of amateurs, parents, babies and toddlers (and, of course, the assorted grandparents and nannies) making music all over the land.

Not only that, there is a research base which proves the value of these early experiences. Led by Helen Taylor and Jim Clark of the University of Northumbria a three-year study funded by Youth Music explored the effect of music making on more than 400 under-fives who attended Sure Start nurseries in two Youth Music Early Years Zones. It found that children as young as two are able to memorise and learn long sequences of words, phrases and sentences, when they are attached to music, long before they can master the same skill in speech.

As you might expect, Youth Music is big in early years work, so big that it has created an online resource for parents and practitioners called the Bongo Club. Here you will find Clark and Taylor's research and an online consultation designed to lead to the creation of a new resource, *Music-start*, with a book, CD, instruments and activities to get the most reluctant couch potato parents to get up and bop, all based on the best work being done in the field now.

There is no need to wait, though. You can already get hold of something called Melody Monkey's Marvellous Music Box, literally a box of tricks containing instruments, puppets, songs, games and two CDs, to help practitioners lead music-making sessions with groups of young children. It was recently revamped with new songs and a new finger puppet to add to animal glove puppets Melody Monkey, Crotchet Crocodile, Octave Owl, Forte Frog and Five Little Monkeys. The pup-

pets help the children to explore concepts such as finding and using their singing voices, understanding pulse and rhythm, and finding out about the sounds of different musical instruments.

Musicians who want to get into early years work will find a wealth of resources in the practitioners' section of the Bongo Club. There's a new publication out this month, *Tuning in to Children*, a training handbook suitable for everyone involved. And even Youth Music acknowledges that theirs is not the only show in town – there is a wide variety of musical games and resources out there for parents and early years musicians.

'Five years ago there was nothing in this region,' says Nikki-Kate Heyes of SoundLINC'S, a community music organisation in Lincolnshire. 'Now our main arena of work is with three to five-year-olds. We offer a series of six workshops in pre-school settings and we make sure that there are three 40-minute sessions in each, one with the practitioners, one with the children and one with the parents (without the children). The philosophy is to involve the community, to support the parents learn to play and have ideas about how they can do this at home.'

Each session has goals, for example dealing with pitch, rhythm or making instruments, and there is always a little sharing at the end, called a mini melt. There's a toy library system whereby people can borrow kits to aid their session. There's no formal curriculum and the whole edifice is supported by a resource pack with ideas for equipment, songs, sound sculptures, how to create and write music and many other useful activities.

'This all links with the Stepping Stones and Foundation Stage Goals' says Heyes. 'It's more a teaching mode than a responsive mode and the whole system is kite-marked by the Pre-school Learning Alliance and the County Council Pre-school advisers.' The idea is that after the six weeks the people normally running the particular setting, for example a playgroup, have gained confidence to continue creative music ideas for themselves. There is a regular annual or biannual follow-up visit. So far SoundLINC'S has undertaken 990 residencies within the 600 early years settings in Lincolnshire.

A similar approach to cascading learning so that groups can develop their own music activities characterises the early years activities of The Sage Gateshead. There are daily sessions in the Norman Foster building which cost parents £3 per person whatever their age. But in its efforts to 'irrigate, not drain' the musical landscape of the region The Sage also

runs workshops all over the north-east. 'Most of our work is based on one training session plus follow-ups from musicians,' says Steph Brandon, head of early years and family learning. 'Initially people say "Ooh, aren't they marvellous, I couldn't do that."' But, of course, the idea is to get them to do that, through training, patient encouragement and example, and it seems to work.

Brandon is passionate about her work. 'If one person from a group voluntarily sings a song at home with their child, then that's changed the world for me. If the parents and carers of children under five don't sing with them, it's a positive disservice to them. If you could scan a child's brain during music activity it would be lit up like a Christmas tree.' Sure enough there's a definite social angle to the work of The Sage, determined by a mixture of a desire to reach those hardest to reach and the availability of funding streams to do just that.

'The DfES Pathfinder programme allows us to get musicians to toddler groups in the poorest areas of County Durham, taking CDs and getting the parents singing,' says Brandon. 'As well as that, through the Transformation Fund, day nurseries can enrich and enhance the children's experience by buying in a package of evening training sessions, backed up by CDs and follow up visits from musicians from The Sage Gateshead's early years team. This enables the practitioners to transform their nursery themselves – it really does change people's lives!'

Judging by the research results from Taylor and Clark there is no better way the government could be spending our money. They found that regular weekly or biweekly contact over a two-year period between a musician and very young children supports development in communication and language skills and understanding. They use their voices more, increase their vocabulary, begin to understand rhyming, are more able to listen and respond to spoken instructions, learn how conversation works through 'call and response' activities, develop greater control of their voices through learning to pitch notes and are

more able to tell their own stories through creating their own songs. And that's just language.

In mathematics they develop skills in counting, sequencing, patterning, addition and subtraction and one-to-one correspondence. Music has an impact on the children's emotional, social, physical and cultural development and their growing sense of self. And all this is on top of the more obviously musical skills they learn, singing in tune, timbre, developing their own songs and playing with the form, tune and words of familiar songs. technical skills in sound production with improved hand-eye coordination, demonstrating expressive quality with a sense of musical purpose, developing personal 'taste' in music. increased 'attentive listening' and greater concentration span.

For parents and carers, too, there are undoubted benefits. This was very obvious at the Singing Babies session I attended. With such young children most of them had to be helped by their carers to participate in the activities. The carers seemed to get as much out of it as the babies, whirling them round, pushing in and out and singing raucously along with the best. Many of them told me that they sang the songs, a mixture of traditional and newly made-up music, at home with their children, doing all the actions as well. One lady was back with her new baby and is still making the music with her now four-year-old who attended previously.

The sessions are run by Charlie Buchanan and Louise Khazae, two mums with a musical background who just decided that their village needed something like this. Funded solely by the fees paid by participants it's not a great money-spinner, but the value of the experience is worth far more. They produce a kind of performance, perfectly timed and paced, in which the children and grown-ups all play a part.

All of it was riveting, but there was one section I particularly admired. Plastic tubes, boomwhackers, cut to create tuned pitches when struck on the floor, were rolled slowly across the room. Nothing else was happening, no noise, and the eyes of every child followed those tubes and the gentle sound they made with rapt attention. All the things everyone hopes their baby will do in its first few months were being demonstrated here.

So, tell all the parents of pre-school children you know to get out and find a music session. The Bongo Club website has details of activities in every region and lots of advice and contacts for those who want to start up their own.

www.bongoclub.org.uk

