

Workshop: Educating the voice of young children

Margré van Gestel

Music pedagogue & ECM Teacher trainer
Chair Foundation Toddlers and Music
The Netherlands

v.gestel@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

The life of a young child is filled with music. Even before birth the fetus can hear (at 23-24 weeks) and the singing development originates in the auditory and affective experiences of the developing fetus. The fetus remembers musical patterns and sounds and associates them with emotions. When parents sing for the unborn, the fetus can begin to form pre-birth relationships with parents and parents with them (Whitwell, 1999)

Parents singing with their children are shaping the infant's vocal production through the interaction with the acoustic characteristics of maternal culture (Welch, 2006)

Singing development in early childhood reflects the cultural context and the developmental process. Intuitively parents sing and speak to their baby at higher pitch levels, using a wider pitch range. They make longer pauses, and speak often at a slower rate (Thurman & Welch, 2000; Welch, 2006). But, due to contemporary lifestyles, many parents do not have time and some leave their babies in automatic rockers with cassette music to listen to. But this does not promote singing (or parent-child bonding!) Helping parents to recall traditional repertoire of lullabies, play songs and songs for day care routines, may be a starting point to singing with their baby.

Musical interactions

It may appear that mothers are leading the interactions with their babies. But in success-full mother-baby interaction it is often the other way round. The smallest body movement, facial and vocal cues can dictate responses and the sequence of interactions. Equally, when babies have had enough, they will give "turn-off" signals. They may turn their heads away or even shut their eyes.

When you listen to anyone talking and singing to a baby they will intuitively slip into a specific style, known as infant-directed. They will keep to simple words, organized in short phrases which are repeated. They will speak or sing slowly, with greater stress on certain words to make speech and singing more rhythmical, pause for longer than would be normal in adult speech and songs and use an expressive "sing-song", curving up and down the pitch (Papousek, 1996).

Singing for the baby helps building the relationship between parents and baby. Mother learns to understand and respond appropriately to baby's non-verbal cues, and to help baby relax in moments of stress. When parents sing to babies they instinctively hug, cradle, rock and stroke them. Being carried and swayed in time to music is very pleasurable to babies. Bodily contact and rhythmical movement are unified with singing.

In each age the human voice has a distinctive underlying anatomy and physiology that is capable of producing a

diversity of “singing” behaviors (Welch, ???). In the first months of life, these ‘sung’ products are driven by basic human needs, before becoming more exploratory and melodic in nature. Opportunities to engage in vocal play and exploration, to share singing games with peers and experts as well as improvise and compose their own songs are essential features of musical cultures that foster singing development. Children who exceed the norms for vocal development are likely to have been provided with a nurturing environment that is designed to match, celebrate, enable and extend individual singing expertise. Everyone has the potential to learn to sing. We need therefore, to continue to seek optimal ways to allow children to explore and extend their singing.

months	patterns begin to appear
18-24 months	Sings small group of notes. Creates short spontaneous songs with small melodic intervals and flexible rhythm patterns. Able to learn to produce short melodic patterns from simple songs.
24 months	Sings phrases. Uses melodic patterns from learned songs in spontaneous singing.
2-3 years	Sings parts of songs. Imitates short songs or melodies, but not always accurately. May change melody to better accommodate the voice range.
3 years +	Sings whole songs.

Development of singing

Researchers have been interested in children’s singing since the start of the twentieth century. When we have a look at the development of singing we have to start with the first cry. In the first cry of a newborn baby we find all the elements of singing: variations of pitch, variations in intensity, rhythmic and melodic patterns and sentence structure (Vihman, 1996). The primary function of the infant larynx is to protect the airway and to aid in swallowing. The high placement of the larynx in the vocal tract results in the infant vocalizing in a fairly high range (Flohr, 2004). The larynx of a new born baby is not just a miniature of the adult organ. It shows differences in its position (a high place, baby: between the cervical vertebrae C2 and C3, age five: between C4 and C5) in the composition and in environmental adaptation. (Kuhl, 1997). Over the first six months of life the larynx undergoes dramatic change, along with the rest of the vocal tract, to more closely resemble the adult version (Saski, Suzuki and Horiuch, 1977 cited by Fhlor, 2004, p.81).

The first three years of life are characterized by increasingly diverse vocal activity: from cooing and gurgling, then musical babbling and vocal play to singing entire songs.

While this behavioral sequence seems consistent among children, the ages at which each child exhibits these behaviors varies. Many environmental factors (e.g. familial vocal use, native language) influence children’s singing. Research on how singing generally develops remains inconclusive and difficult to generalize, indicating individual variability in young children’s voices. Much research with preschool and elementary aged children seems to focus on their ability to sing in tune. Singing in tune is important but should not be an issue of concern before the child has healthy use of the voice. Often children do not sing in tune because they have not developed enough vocal strength to do so, or they use the voice inappropriately (Flohr, 2004).

Singing:

- is a psychomotor skill
- requires precision movements
- uses cartilages, muscles and ligaments
- makes simultaneous use of vertical, lateral and rocking movements
- aims for gracefulness in movement

If not executed properly may result in physical injury. Everyone who is involved in teaching singing to young children should have a basic understanding of the physical working of the voice of these young children.

Song Acquisition Development

Ages	Behavior
Birth to 6 months	Cooing, vowel like sounds and babbling with intonation
6-12 months	Imitate others. Mostly descending intervals
12-18 months	Glissandos
18-20	Discrete pitches, melodic and rhythmic

Music in Early Childhood settings in The Netherlands

In The Netherlands, Early Childhood Music Education started in 1989 with the Early Childhood Music teacher training “Music on the Lap”. Nowadays a ‘Music on the lap’ course is a regular item in music schools and many ‘Music on the Lap’ teachers have a regular job in one of the 82 ‘SKON’ Day Care Centers.

In music schools 'Music on the lap' teachers work with parents and children aged 4 months to 4 years. Each child attends the lessons with one parent or caregiver. Early childhood music courses usually consist of 8-10 lessons. Each group has 8- 12 children and the lessons are 30 to 45 minutes. In SKON day care centers Mol teachers work with different age groups on a regular basis of 40 music lessons a year.

In the Netherlands, during a one year training, musicians learn to prepare well balanced, well structured music lessons, taking into account the culture, the music, the age of the children, providing suitable materials: toys as well as music instruments. They also provide parents songs for day care routines. The musicians learn how to link listening, moving, playing, dancing and singing activities to the development of the children. The early childhood music teacher should be able to provide structure, creating logical and musical transitions between music activities and taking care for repetition of songs, at least 5 or 6 times. The workshop will demonstrate a range of songs suitable for children at different stages of development.

The first steps in the education of the child's voice should be taken in the homes. The moments and places where parents sing with their children are important. Music courses for parents and children should provide song and

play material suitable for use in day care routines. Early childhood music teachers have an important task in educating young parents (and grandparents) in playing and singing with their children. Singing together in a safe environment (home, nursery or kindergarten) with repertoire suitable for the age group is a first step in educating the next generation of singers. Singing is natural, and a basic human need. Children need an environment in which they are allowed to sing (and sometimes they need silence too!). They also have a need of caregivers, parents, teachers who sing with them, every day of their lives. Singing is natural, but a voice needs time to grow and develop!

In early childhood and especially in early childhood music teaching we have to link the songs and activities to the development of the whole child. We have to give children the opportunity to repeat the songs as often as possible. We also have to be aware that the capacities of children 'under four' to sing and play music games change rapidly day by day. We should have enough musical and pedagogical skills and knowledge to guide them and to introduce all the children into the fantastic world of singing and making music together.

REFERENCES

Flohr, John W. (2004) *Musical Lives of Young children*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Kuhl, P.K. (2004) 'Early language acquisition; cracking the speech code'. *Nature reviews Neuroscience*, 5, 831-843

Papousek, H. (1996) *Musicality in infant research: Biological and cultural origins of early musicality*. In L. Deliège & J. Sloboda (eds) *Musical Beginnings: Origins and development of musical competence* (pp.37-55). New York: Oxford University Press.

Thurman, L. & Welch, G.F. (Eds) (2000). *Bodymind and voice: Foundation of voice*

education. (Rev. ed.) Iowa City, Iowa: National Centre for Voice and Speech.

Vihman, M.M. (1996) *Phonological development*. Oxford: Blackwell

Whitwell, G.D. (1999) The importance of prenatal sounds and music, *Journal of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health* 13 (3-4): 255-62

Welch, G.F. (2006). The musical development and education of young children. In B. Spodek & O. Saracho (eds) *Handbook of research and education of Young children* (pp 251-267), Mahwah, N): Lawrence Erlbaum.