

# The power of musical PLAY



A SIMPLE SONG CAN HELP SOOTHE AND  
REGULATE KIDS' EMOTIONS, EXPLAINS  
MUSICAL PLAY THERAPY PIONEER **JULIE WYLIE**.





Since the beginning of time, and in every culture, parents have instinctively rocked, patted and sung to their children – to calm themselves and their child. This singing and rocking helps the lower brain and sensory system provide self-regulation. The lullaby *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* is a timeless sleep aid not only because it's soft and slow, but because it follows a predictable format with a clear beginning, middle and end. The song starts with a leap of five notes, from C to G, and this leap to the fifth note immediately interests the brain. The song then moves down step-by-step to the home note C. Because our brains prefer orderly patterns, children tune in to the way the song begins, evolves, peaks then resolves, and can anticipate and follow the musical form of the song.

Musical play is a child's first language and is a natural part of their life and culture. The rhythms of nursery rhymes contain all the rhythmic patterns of early childhood: walking, running, skipping and galloping.

Music is a vital part of our humanity and is an intuitive, expressive language of the emotions. Think back to those first interactions with your newborn baby. Your newborn knew and listened for your voice – it was the most important sound in the world for your baby.

You may consider yourself 'musical' but your interactions such as singing, speaking, moving and dancing together involve exquisitely timed turn-taking, rather like that of jazz musicians. Such musical interactions lay a foundation of experience which our brains and bodies remember, as well as a spectrum of happy emotions and loving connections which help to build secure relationships.

#### THAT VICIOUS CYCLE

Humans are first and foremost emotional beings. The major and most fundamental concern of our brains is safety and survival. Anything that our brain senses could be detrimental to our safety and survival

will receive top priority. Everything else will have to wait, including thinking and reasoning.

This is especially true for young children. When they feel anxious or afraid, their system goes into a state of panic. They can't think rationally or logically, and often forget even the simplest routines. A state of high arousal makes them feel out of control, and they can't make any sense of the world.

Unfortunately, parents and teachers often say that a child's reactions to anxiety and stress will trigger their own emotional responses, and they can become angry and start shouting. Thus, ongoing stress and anxiety often creates a cycle of tension, exhaustion, regret and a deep sense of sadness. To relax, we all need our brains to be calm and regulated, but young children simply cannot calm themselves, and will need their parents' or caregivers' help. This is where a simple song can be so beneficial – for everyone.

### MUSIC AND THE BRAIN: RESTORING ORDER IN CHAOS

Music is like a natural sedative that helps to reduce the brain's instinctive fight-or-flight responses by calming the system for long enough that efficient regulation can be restored.

Our brains love patterns and respond to music's predictable formats, rhythms and rhymes. Information paced by rhythmic pulse and pattern is non-threatening. As soon as information becomes structured and organised within rhythm and pitch patterns, fear disappears and the lower brain induces the release of dopamine and other natural relaxants, allowing information to be enjoyed and processed by the whole brain. It's impossible to remain angry when we match our child's pace and emotional levels through singing, chanting and musical play.

Music is a language of the emotions. We don't have to think in order to respond

the opportunity to interact musically and playfully, using instructional songs in daily routines to match the child's energy levels to either arouse or calm them.

### HOW TO WEAVE MUSICAL PLAY INTO EVERYDAY LIFE

1. Use the tunes of familiar songs to sing instructions that support daily routines, such as tidying up toys, washing hands, getting dressed, going to bed and getting into the car. For example, "This is the way we brush our teeth, brush our teeth, brush our teeth. This is the way we brush our teeth, before we go bed" can be sung to the tune of *Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush*, while the tune of *The Farmer in the Dell* can be used to sing all sorts of instructions, such as "It's time to have a bath. It's time to have a bath. We are going to the bath. It's time to have a bath".
2. Go on a treasure hunt at the beach or the park to collect a variety of nature's

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to music. Babies and young children understand music expression at an intuitive, lower-brain level without even having developed intellect, as such. Music also structures the moment. It helps us to slow down, to breathe normally, and is one of the most viable resources for putting the body at ease.

### THE KEYS TO A CHILD'S LEARNING

To learn well, a child needs three things: first, to be calm and alert (controlled by the lower brain); secondly, to be in happy engagement with people who love them (controlled by the mid-brain); and thirdly, to form positive memories, including language, through experiencing the world (controlled by the mid-brain and the upper cortex).

Predictable musical activities offer children numerous opportunities to learn well, and will help create the three conditions above. Parents and teachers are obviously key players here, and have

treasures, such as shells, driftwood, stones, leaves, bark, conkers and acorns. Children delight in exploring the sounds and rhythmic patterns they can make with these natural percussion instruments, and love their parents to imitate what they're doing.

3. Take a stick on a sound hunt and see how many sounds you can make. Run it along corrugated fences and trees, tap it on a metal grating and the bars at the playground, and swish it in a pile of leaves or long grass. Talk about whether the sounds are high or low, smooth or rough, and loud or quiet.
4. Sing traditional songs with a steady beat and predictable sequence of actions, such as *The Wheels On The Bus*, *Row Row Your Boat*, *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, *Humpty Dumpty*, *I'm a Little Teapot* and *Old MacDonald Had A Farm*. Children thrive on repetition and familiarity, and feel a sense of accomplishment when they are able to master the words and actions

### CALMING IDEAS FOR STRESSED OR ANXIOUS CHILDREN

- 1 Facing your child, use long slow breaths to blow large bubbles. Watching you do this will help to slow and regulate your child's breathing, especially if your bubble blowing is accompanied by calming music such as *Bubbles Pop* from my *Sing and Play* album.
- 2 Use the power of rhythm. Jumping on a trampoline, being pushed forward and back on a swing, or being cuddled and rocked on a parent's knee in time to calming music will help to lower arousal levels when emotions run high.
- 3 Give your child a drum to play out their emotions, and echo what they do. Alternatively, you can play rhythmic patterns on the drum for your child to copy. Match their energy levels by, for example, playing loud and fast to begin with, before gradually slowing down and getting quieter, to help your child to slow down and become calm.
- 4 Water play is calming and relaxing. Children enjoy pouring water from one container to another, making slow swirling patterns with their fingers, and exploring what sounds they can make by dropping different objects into the water.
- 5 Sing nursery rhymes or stories. The book *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you See?* by Bill Martin has helped to calm countless children.
- 6 Use deep pressure massage on your child's back as they lie on their tummy. With the palms of your hands, give slow steady strokes as you listen to calming music such as *Sula Lula (Rock-A-Bye Blues album)* or *Up and Down (Starting on the Right Foot album)*.
- 7 Slowly catch and throw a balloon. Tracking the balloon's movement helps your child to focus, and when accompanied by appropriate music, slow balloon play helps children to feel regulated again.

of familiar songs. As they get older, children love to alter the words to familiar songs, and create their own versions, for example, “The wheels on the bus go round and round” might become “The wheels on my bike go round and round”.

5. Play with open-ended props, such as scarves and hula-hoops, which will provide endless scope for creativity and imagination. To children, a scarf could be anything from a superhero’s cape to a magic carpet, while a hula-hoop might be a steering wheel, a swimming pool, a flying saucer or even a portal to another world. Make up songs with your children that describe what they are doing with the props.

6. Enjoy the chance to be dramatic and animated at story time. Experiment with a high voice, a low voice and dramatic pauses, as you read old favourites like *We’re Going On A Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen, and *Goldilocks And The Three Bears*. Rhyming stories such as *Hairy Maclary From Donaldson’s Dairy* by Lynley Dodd and *A Summery Saturday Morning* by Margaret Mahy can be sung or chanted.

7. Get creative and make a music wall or a music tree outside by hanging up everyday items, such as pots, pans and kitchen utensils, which children can beat and bang to their heart’s content – depending on your neighbours’ state of mind!

8. Draw or paint to classical music, such as Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* – which provides wonderful contrasts of mood and rhythm – and then sing your child’s picture. Dots or splodges might be sung as a bop or a ding, swirls or swooshes might be sung as whooshing sounds, and zigzags like a siren.

9. Quality tuned chime bars, such as Angel Resonator Bells or a small metal glockenspiel, are wonderful for helping children to make up their own songs.

Children also love simple percussion instruments, such as maracas and drums, which they can play as they march or dance to the beat of their favourite music.

10. Dance together! Children love the chance to take the lead and make up their own actions for you to copy as they move spontaneously to songs like *Fire Engine*, *Blues Train* and *Magic Carpet* (from my album *Bop It In The Rocket*).

#### TIPS FOR MUSIC INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN

☆ Leave pauses for your child to fill and sing echo songs together. Allow them to be the music leader and imitate their sounds or movements. This validates their musical offerings and promotes creativity and confidence.

☆ Sing about what your child is doing.

☆ Use predictable songs with a clear beginning, middle and end. Songs that are too fast or wordy are difficult to follow and understand.

☆ Include plenty of facial expressions and animation. Experiment with dramatic pauses, a high voice, a low voice and whispering, and give some contrast by speeding up or slowing down.

☆ Use predictable step-by-step sung or chanted instructions to help children learn to wait, watch, listen, anticipate, and follow a sequence of actions. *Elke’s Song* on my CD *Teddy Bear’s Tango* lends itself to being changed to fit any set of instructions.

☆ Limit screen time.

☆ Always end with slow, calming activities and songs.

Musical play activates every part of the brain and promotes healthy brain development and a sense of wellbeing. It also brings everyone into synchrony. Interacting musically together naturally builds strong bonds of loving relationship and lays the foundation of music for life. •

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