

Building Musical Bridges: Early Childhood Learning and Musical Play

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“... to see play for what it is at its core, namely, an expression of the human spirit.”

—Scarlett, Naudeau, Salonijs-Pasternek & Ponte, 2005, p. xi

In their early years, children’s understanding of the world is often developed through a combination of social and construction play experiences, where children learn not only from assembling objects and taking them apart, but also from creating and recreating through interactions with peers and adults within their home and school environments. Musical experiences for children can be designed with a similar play perspective, where an emphasis on “how music works” encourages children to apply thinking and reasoning skills about musical sounds and musical patterns they sing, hear, and play on instruments. Identifying solutions to simple “musical problems” can occur individually, in small groups, and in large-group settings, as children play with each other and with familiar (teachers) and unfamiliar (guest artists) adults in their classrooms.

Recognizing the importance of this type of learning in early childhood, a music program designed with a core of developmentally appropriate and playful experiences (Coppole & Bredekamp 2006) can support children’s social, cognitive, and emotional development. This paper presents a theoretical context for play as a learning medium, and offers examples from early childhood music lessons that illustrate how these types of play are naturally imbedded in music learning. To address the role of musical play in early learning, we first establish this idea with brief comments on theories of play and development, and then offer examples to illustrate “what musical play looks like” inside the early childhood classroom.

Developmental Theories and Play

Many play theorists have created taxonomies of play behaviors, attempting to categorize their observations as children developed over the early childhood years. Scarlett, Naudeau, Solonijs-Pasternek, and Ponte summarized four approaches from the literature related to play and children’s development: a) psychoanalytic theory, b) cognitive-developmental theory, c) cultural-ethological theory, and d) evolutionary and comparative theory (Scarlett et al. 2005, 7-13). They suggested that the most well known theorists were Erikson and Freud (psychoanalytic) along with Piaget and Vygotsky (cognitive-developmental).

Psychologist Elkind (2006) further identified four major types of play behavior used by young children as they create learning experiences, categories that can be very useful to music educators in planning for early childhood music teaching.

Mastery play makes it possible for children to construct concepts and skills. Innovative play occurs when the child has mastered concepts and skills, and introduces variations. Kinship play initiates the child into the world of peer relations. Therapeutic play gives children strategies for dealing with stressful life events. (Elkind 2006, 103)

These general ideas about the importance of play have been incorporated into documents addressing the preparation and training of early childhood educators (Copple & Brederman 2006). More recently, music educators and researchers have sought models that might apply to musical play in the context of music instruction.

Musical Play

Researchers have categorized the qualities and character of musical play among young children in different settings, reporting these in both research journals and other types of professional publications (Berger & Cooper 2003; Campbell 2010; Marsh & Young 2006; Tarnowski 1999). Researchers Berger and Cooper observed play between children and parents enrolled in a music enrichment program, with a primary interest in how the parents might facilitate these play experiences. Based on three themes that emerged (unfinished play, extinguished play, and enhanced play), the researchers concluded that “children needed extended, uninterrupted time for play episodes as well as appropriate materials in the environment. Adult valuing of all children’s musical utterances and flexibility within structured lessons enhanced play” (Berger & Cooper, 151).

Observations of musical play in various environments were reported in situated studies by Campbell (2010) and in a review by Marsh and Young (2006). Campbell observed preschool children playing outside their classroom, applying ethnomusicology approaches to document the many ways that children’s activities and exchanges were shaped in what appeared to be spontaneous musical phrases and chants. In their review of writings on musical play, Marsh and Young commented: “as play is assumed in educational theory and research to be a valuable learning experience of young children, in early childhood preschool or nursery settings it is usual practice for free play to be provided for and encouraged” (Marsh & Young, 290). They further define play as “the activities that children initiate of their own accord in which they may choose to participate with others voluntarily” (290). This view, however, could unnecessarily limit musical play only to the behaviors outside the classroom setting where children are playing independent of a teacher’s supervision. Marsh and Young acknowledge that an “understanding of the intuitive ways in which children make music when left to their own resources has provided vital information for the design of educational activities that can be made more appropriate to children’s self-motivated learning styles” (290). A music teaching approach that builds on children’s playful encounters could provide more experiences that are meaningful for children. Tarnowski supports a similar idea, with recommendations for early childhood music teachers to:

create a learning environment that is conducive to musical play. It should be rich in high-quality materials and should be a place in which children can take risks

without the fears of failure.... Music is a communicative and expressive discipline, laden with possibilities for exploration, improvisation, and creation. As such, it the perfect place to allow and enhance the natural play of young children. (Tarnowski 1999, 29)

Given these statements of encouragement by musical play researchers and few published curricular materials addressing music instruction from a play perspective (Fox, Surmani, Barden, Kowalchuk, & Lancaster 2004, 2007, 2010), there is a continuing need to identify how musical play experiences could be organized and implemented in the early childhood classroom. What would this look like in a classroom of 4- and 5-year-old children? The following examples of teacher-planned musical experiences offer descriptions of music experiences that incorporate both the social and the cognitive aspects of play. In the social play setting with music, children are interacting with peers and adults to make music as a group, sometimes taking a turn for an individual or a solo experience. From the perspective of teaching thinking skills in the classroom, the focus is on construction play, i.e. putting things together and taking things apart to discover their relationships and their connections. These examples are designed to be taught by either a musically prepared teacher or a classroom teacher who has a strong interest in music.

Example 1: Construction Play with Musical Phrases (“Sally Go ‘Round the Sun”)

The preschool class was learning concepts of time, including the role of the sun and moon in the day to night cycle. The teacher identified vocabulary words such as morning, afternoon, evening, and night, and chose the song/rhyme “Sally Go ‘Round the Sun” to help the children apply the terms:

Sally Go 'Round the Sun

The image shows the musical notation for the song "Sally Go 'Round the Sun". It consists of two staves of music in G major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. The first staff contains the first two phrases: "Sal - ly go 'round the sun." and "Sal - ly go 'round the moon." The second staff contains the final phrase: "Sal - ly go 'round the chim - ney top, Evc - ry af - ter - noon. KA BOOM!". The melody is simple and repetitive, with a strong pulse. The lyrics are written below the notes.

The children first tapped the steady pulse of the song while the teacher sang the song several times to introduce both the musical material and the words from their lesson on time. Then, together, they played a simple large-group singing game, with the teacher continuing to sing the song. Many children joined in singing as they became familiar with the melodic patterns: do (phrase one), mi (phrase two), and sol (phrase three) were the main pitches, with a familiar “mi-re-do” ending pattern. They walked in a circle for the first three phrases, and knelt down on the ending word: “ka-boom!” The challenge was to time this movement with the final strong pulse. The teacher invited one child to choose a classroom percussion instrument from their collection to play on that final “boom”

syllable, further accenting the idea that “this is the end” of the song. Among the various options in the instrument box, the children’s favorite choices for this ending were a large drum, a cymbal crash, and a scraping sound on a ridged instrument. With an anticipatory physical lift on the “ka-” syllable, the strongly accented “boom” syllable clearly signaled the end of the song—both in sound and in movement.

At the next encounter with the song, the teacher created four square cards, each with a single picture, to visually represent the four phrases:

- 1) a bright yellow sun for phrase one,
- 2) a white moon with silver stars for phrase two,
- 3) a house with a prominent chimney on the roof for phrase three, and
- 4) a clock face with hands arranged at one o’clock for phrase four.

Four children stood in a line facing the larger group, and, when the teacher placed the four pictures in their hands, they spread out to allow space for movement between them. The teacher invited the other children to play “follow the leader,” changing from the initial circle formation into a line that snaked around and between the children holding the cards. The final “ka-boom” was again illustrated by the kneeling motion.



Figure 1 Song cards for “Sally Go Round the Sun”

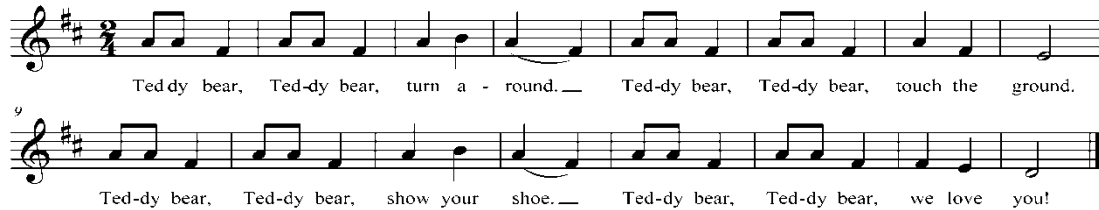
After several individual children were invited to lead the line, the teacher retrieved the pictures from the four children. She held up each picture and asked the children to identify the lyrics for each. The children easily remembered lyrics, rhythm, and melody. The teacher then mixed up the cards and invited one child to reconstruct the correct order for “Sally Go ‘Round the Sun.” The children spontaneously sang the song as the child “editor” worked out the accurate ordering of the song phrases.

Example 2: Social and Construction Play with Song Material (“Teddy Bear”)

The four-year-olds first learned the song “Teddy Bear” through social play, acting out the words to the song during repeated singing by the teacher. Each child took a turn to hold a

soft teddy bear during one singing of the song, demonstrating their individual understanding of the lyrics by matching the teddy bear’s movements to the actions described in the text. Through these repeated experiences, the teddy bear became a familiar and welcome member of the group.

Teddy Bear



Following this embodied experience with the “Teddy Bear” song, the teacher showed the children a sequence of pictures representing segments from the song, forming a left-to-right linear construction with eight individual pictures (anticipating later application to notation on the musical staff). The children readily identified these pictures as a puzzle, noting that four of the puzzle pieces were exactly alike.

Table 1 Sequence of Teddy Bear Pictures for Construction Musical Play

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Lyrics							
Teddy bear, Teddy bear,	Turn around,	Teddy bear, Teddy bear,	Touch the ground,	Teddy bear, Teddy bear	Show your shoe,	Teddy bear, Teddy bear,	We love you!
Pictures							
2 teddy bears	a circular line	2 teddy bears	arrow pointing down	2 teddy bears	picture of a shoe	2 teddy bears	Large red heart

When the teacher challenged them by mixing up the picture cards, the children eagerly offered to “put the cards in order” to recreate the song in its original form. While doing this, they continued to sing the song with increasing independence and confidence. The teacher then invited them to work in pairs, each pair with a full set of puzzle pieces, taking turns with “mixed up” versus “accurate” designs for the song. The children were deeply engaged in this construction task, all the while continuing to sing the melodic and rhythmic patterns with increasing accuracy.

Another day, after the teams had mastered this task of correctly ordering the puzzle pieces, the teacher invited the children to use the puzzle pieces to “make their own Teddy Bear song.” To illustrate, she showed them how moving just one puzzle piece (moving card #1 to be the end of the song instead of the beginning) changed the original to “something new.” The children eagerly embraced this assignment, forming new arrangements from the rhythmic and melodic elements in Teddy Bear. They built new and original designs with the song cards, then mixed them up and tried other ideas.

While the “correct” version of the song was always a possibility, all of the duos instead formed some variation of their own. Some children chose to put all the “teddy bear” patterns together (1, 3, 5, 7), grouping these repetitious patterns into one large section. These followed the other cards (2, 4, 6, 8) that were quite a challenge to sing without the familiar melodic movement. The children sometimes paused to think for several seconds as they looked at the picture and decided what to sing. Other times, when card 8 (mi-re-do) was repositioned to another place in the song, the pull of the tonic was so strong that they seemed compelled to sing it correctly. Other children decided to perform the piece backwards (8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1), followed by peals of laughter at their funny idea. The children proudly performed these “re-mixed Teddy Bear” musical constructions, and relished their new roles as composers and arrangers.

These first two classroom examples focused on construction play with the musical material of songs and rhymes. The third example presents a themed musical experience, designed around the visit of an adult musician to the early childhood classroom. In this situation, the opportunities for social play extend beyond peers, finding musical connections with someone who performs music in a way that is different from young children’s personal experience. In the following example of social play with a visiting artist, children identify the role of musician in an entirely new way. They can act out song lyrics and rhymes that are related to the visitor’s demonstration (dramatic play), and they have a chance to actually play with a sound-making instrument that goes beyond the simple percussion instruments found in their classroom.

Example 3: Social and Dramatic Play with Visiting Musicians: The Bassoon

The early childhood classroom is hosting a special visitor today! Timothy’s father is coming to share his musical instrument, the bassoon. The teacher has planned activities that will make connections between this formally-trained musician and the children, who already view themselves as “music makers” in the classroom. With the children, the teacher previously read the picture book *Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin* (Moss, 1995), which has rhythmic verses describing the sounds of various orchestral instruments, including one verse on the bassoon. They are excited to meet their artist visitor.

The lesson begins with a routine opening activity, a name game rhyme. The children pat the steady pulse while speaking each child’s name in a verse. As a child’s name is incorporated in the song, she decides where to “put the beat” for that verse. Sara decides to pat the pulse on her knees while everyone chants the words for her verse.

Sara is a Music Maker



Sa-ra is a mus-ic mak-er sing and move and play. Sa-ra is a mus-ic mak-er she'll have fun to day.

The father/musician has joined the music-making circle for this opening activity, becoming a member of the group. He is invited to assemble his instrument as the children observe. Children are initially interested in the case where the instrument resides, so the

teacher asks the musician to comment on the spaces inside the case that outline the shape of the various bassoon parts. Other questions from the teacher guide the visiting musician toward concepts appropriate to the four-year-olds in the classroom:

1. How many parts does your instrument have? (Six. Let's count them as you put your instrument together.)
2. How can you tell where to put the parts of your instrument? (by matching the shape)
3. Do these parts have names? (yes, from the bottom: boot joint, wing joint, long joint, bell joint, then add the curvy metal part called the bocal, and finally the double reed). It's like a puzzle!
4. Does your instrument have a name? Bassoon
5. Now that you have your instrument put together, will you play a song we know?

The father/musician plays something familiar to the children, a song they can quickly recognize. Most of the children begin to sing along immediately when they discover the melody is "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." The teacher encourages their participation by modeling movements with the song and singing with the children. Together, the visiting artist, the teacher, and the children share this familiar song.

As the bassoon was being constructed, it became apparent—every time a part was added—that this was going to be a very tall instrument. After the children hear the instrument, the teacher asks whether any of the children are the same height as the bassoon: "Who is taller? Shorter? Let's measure the bassoon! Let's measure the children!"

The teacher asks the father/musician how the sound is produced (do you blow air/buzz your lips/pluck strings/use a bow?) and how the sound can be changed (push a valve/button, push down a key, slide a finger on the string, use a bow or use your finger?). The father/musician demonstrates these elements of sound production on the instrument, and then invites the children to help him with this. The children individually take a turn to alter the sound while the musician provides the sound source, i.e. they push down one or two keys while the bassoonist provides the air flow. (See Figure 2 for an example of this interaction, where one child takes her turn with a plastic pick to play the electric guitar.)



Figure 2 One child explores the sound-making properties of a visiting artist’s instrument. (This is an electric guitar.)

After taking turns to explore sound-making on the artist’s instrument, children are invited to listen to a “recital” by the bassoonist, who presents a 2-minute excerpt from his adult repertoire. At this moment, the children practice concert behavior as they hear a live performance, close at hand, with an accomplished artist. The children applaud at the close of the performance; the musician takes a bow and then rejoins the music-making circle of children and teacher.

Other play-oriented experiences related to the bassoon theme. When the music-making circle resumes, the teacher chants and invites children to show movement responses during their familiar rhyme “Sometimes I’m Very Tall,” learned in a previous lesson. The teacher repeats several times, with children stretching tall, crouching small, and chanting along. While this content links to the bassoon theme, the experience also offers children a chance to stretch and move after their seated listening and recital experience.

Sometimes I'm Very Tall

Some - times I'm ver - y tall. Some - times I'm ver - y small.

Now tall, now small. Now I'm a ti - ny ball.

Sometimes I’m very tall (*stretch up high*)
Sometimes I’m very small (*crouch down low*)
Now tall (*stretch, hold*).... Now small (*crouch, hold*)
Now I’m a tiny ball (*tuck yourself into a tiny ball*).

The teacher introduces a new finger play related to the bassoon. The children had observed that the bassoon has two holes in the bottom segment (the boot), and the

following rhyme about a bunny makes a connection to this idea of using two fingers that “dive into a hole.” Table 2 describes the actions that children use to dramatize the text of the rhyme.

Here's a Bunny

Here's a bun-ny, with ears so fun-ny, and here's his hole in the ground. At the
 first sound he hears, he perks up his ears, and dives in his hole in the ground.

Table 2 Bunny Finger Play

Here's a bunny with ears so funny,	<i>Show index and middle finger in the shape of bunny ears (V) Bend one or both fingers on “funny”</i>
And here's a hole in the ground.	<i>On the other hand, show a circle with thumb and fingers, bring it up to your eye to look through</i>
At the first sound he hears, he perks up his ears,	<i>One child plays a sound cue on woodblock, triangle, or pitched instrument, and then quickly straighten the ears/fingers as if on alert</i>
And dives in his hole in the ground.	<i>Make the two fingers on one hand dive into the circle you've made on the other hand. Use a sliding vocal inflection—high to low—to illustrate the word “dives”</i>

Musical Development through Play Experience

These three examples of musical play in the classroom, involving individual, small-group, and large-group experiences, offered the children opportunities to make decisions, solve problems, and take leadership roles in their social and construction play. These are significant behaviors that may impact on the children's success in their classroom studies in the later years of school. At the same time, these experiences opened up a wide range of possibilities for development in the traditional musical skills of singing, chanting, moving, and playing instruments.

Table 3 Types of Musical Development Addressed in the Play Examples

	Sally Go Round	Teddy Bear Puzzle	Music Maker Visit
Engage in vocal play and develop vocal accuracy	•	•	•
Move in structured and expressive ways	•	•	•
Improvise with text, body, and percussion	•	•	
Analyze song structure and reconstruct musical materials	•	•	
Identify patterns and form through listening and movement	•	•	•
Create new compositions with singing and playing classroom instruments		•	
Interact with peers and adult musicians	•	•	•
Connect literature and music			•
Develop vocabulary to label or describe musical experiences	•	•	•
Use vocabulary to describe sound production in a musical instrument	•		•

In Table 3 we offer a summary of the types of musical development that are evident in the three play scenarios. In addition to the typical behaviors of singing, moving, and playing instruments, the items include a focus on thinking skills (analyze, identify), on self-generated ideas (improvise, create), and on verbal descriptors and vocabulary (label, describe). Interactions between people and connections with literature also expand the children’s musical world beyond today’s activities.

In addition to skill-based music learning, the children’s understanding of musical form was enhanced as they made their own variations through the repetition and contrast discovered in a familiar song (Teddy Bear). Chances to improvise within the structure of the class allowed creative ideas to emerge in their new compositions/arrangements. Children learned about music outside their classroom from a visiting artist, working closely with him as a musical ensemble (“Twinkle, Twinkle”), and they acquired new vocabulary to describe sound production in an orchestral instrument. The children connected the artist’s visit to their rhyming storybook (*Zin! Zin! Zin! A Violin!*), and reinforced more rhyming words as well as concepts of height (tall, small) as they both chanted a familiar movement rhyme and compared themselves to the fully-constructed bassoon. As children acted out these terms and tried out ways to change sound on the instrument by pressing the keys, they continued to expand their identities as collaborating music makers.

Music learned in this manner, through playful experiences in the classroom, becomes internalized and personalized, available to be replayed in any desired context. The boundaries between music, play and learning are joyfully blurred into one experience—music becomes play, and play is music-centered. We encourage you to develop lessons where children have these opportunities. When we design play-filled

music lessons, where children interact with sounds and patterns, with ideas and forms, with peers and artists, the best of the human spirit will flourish within each child.

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