



## **Emma Hutchinson MA**

### **Enabling young children's language in musical ways**

#### **Why do we need music to support language?**

Like so many music specialists I spend a great deal of time justifying why music makes a critical difference to a young child's language development, reading and subsequent life chances.

Our knowledge of sound, song and music making goes back to pre-historic times. It is said that Stonehenge was used as musical stones to accompany song and dance (Devereux and Wozencroft, 2013). Our world resonates with vibrations of rich sounds of every shape and size.



Approximately one in six children between 1 – 6 years old in the UK are diagnosed with language delay (The Communication Trust, 2014). Much of my research, training and practice involves teasing out language development through child-initiated musical activities, with many demonstrating illuminating results. Enjoying musical activities with a young child makes practical sense. It is nurturing, fun, educational and for the most part, free. Music is healthy, persuasive, emotionally positive, distracting, communicative and sociable (MacDonald et al 2012).

The voice is driven by the movements of breathing (Power and Trevarthen:214). Using movement to nurture vocalising, language and music making has been the basis of Music House for Children's practice and research since 1994. My fascination with sound goes back to my own childhood when I was diagnosed as partially deaf. I developed skills as a musician but also had a great love of movement and dance. There exists a common assumption that sounds are heard with our ears. But is it solely? How is sound actually made? Is it made through motion? When air moves it vibrates. Air moves because we, or something else has moved it. Each time we speak we move up to 36 muscles! We could not speak without our muscles moving so which is making the sound?

A particularly successful approach to supporting language development was initiated some years ago with the help of colleagues at my school, Music House for Children. Our musical story tales are multi-sensory, inclusive and fun. Stories are taken from traditional tales, our own imagination, or by the children themselves. Musical stories provide self-initiated opportunities for young children to respond in

imaginative ways. By nurturing physical and vocal response young children move from being the audience to the performer. As lead performers we quietly begin to withdraw from a particular activity by offering questions such as “...but what if?” or, “...and where (did he/she) go?” Children morph into ‘their story’; their imagination runs riot, musically improvisational chaos, ensues and sound and language begins to flow.



### **Starting point for vocalising**

My starting point for nurturing language, engagement and musical alertness in whatever context, need or setting is always through repeated, rhythmic, playful, pitch undulated welcoming sounds, mostly accompanied by spontaneous movement:

“La, la la la la la la la... Doo dah doo dah doo dah...”

In time, even the most resistant talker will move, utter sounds, and/or create vocal and visual letter shapes – always helped by a loved adult joining in. Creating ‘silly’ sounds with movement achieves four things:

- Warms up the voice, body and senses
- Compels enquiry and spontaneous participation
- Engages adults directly with their children
- Emotionally expressive and humorous communication

### Parallels of music and language

Music and language are hierarchically arranged:

Music = notes and keys, chords and progression. Language = letters and syllables; words and sentences.

The process of speaking involves making interesting up and down sounds (pitch), making particular parts of a word louder or softer (dynamics), creating different rhythmical patterns and stressing different parts of a word, letter or phrase. All of these components make up musical openings. If we remove these important musical offerings from a child's vocal experiences what is there left but a dreary sound? Add emotional play to enrich colour, depth and meaning and voila, a voice becomes characterful, individual and expressive.

Dear Reader, try saying the following to a friend with no change in pitch (up and down), emphasis on any word, or rhythm, at an average volume, with each word spoken at exactly the same beat - like a clock going tick, tock, tick, tock, and with as little movement as possible...

"It was a lovely, sunny, warm day. I ran on the sand, by the sea and jumped over two sandcastles. Wee!"

Now try again in *your* way. A little gesture here, an animated expression there. Can you now as the listener, visualise a sunny day on a sandy beach, smell the salty air and feel the warm sun on your arms as you run? Musical, moving play is taking place! (Bannan and Woodward, 2009).



Just as with music, an interesting conversation has melodic ups and downs and rhythmic patterns. Regular musical activities enjoyed by babies and parents' nurtures attachment by the nature of being playful, emotive and shared. Affectionate vocal interaction with a loved adult plays a critical part in helping a child to develop language, particularly in the context of musical play (Buckley, 2003). So, as early childhood educators what else can do to help children develop language acquisition?



### **Repetition and imitation**

Repetitive and imitative in musical activity is hugely empowering for a young child – particularly one who has language delay or English as an Additional Language (EAL). In repetition there is a feeling of security (Turino, 2008).

### **Using irresistible resources**

Providing a few relevant props provide visual affirmation and helps a child to ‘own’ the song. In a case study involving children with moderate to profound language delay I presented a song “All around the daffodils”. Each child stood on a piece of fake grass holding a daffodil. Y. (language delay and EAL) opted to sing about the rain. D. (language delay and autistic) joined in with a spider song. Off we went, on an adventure about a spider and the flowers growing with water splashing everywhere. H. (language delay) wiggled his body to emphasis his point about the flower growing whilst uttering “up, up, up”.

I asked questions “what happened then?” “Where did (the spider) go?” I initiated verbal and physical responses. The children’s story continued evolving with moving, sound and word play, all vital for strengthening confidence, social skills whilst simultaneously developing language. The grass and daffodil were fabulous, fun and sparked off a galloping storyline.

### **Motional vocalising**

Motivational vocalising is the second stage on from an internalised experience. The freedom to move becomes a silent child’s melody and voice. Another music project involving multi-cultural children with language delay included V. aged 4. She had selective mutism and cried throughout the weekly sessions. Over time V. stopped her tears but remained silent and watchful and within the circle of activity.

One day during a song about bees, flowers and honey, V. shrugged her shoulders, raised and lowered her hands, inclined her head and smiled as we sang. In each of her moves the other children agreed with affirmative nods. V was ‘singing’. Her physical responses throughout the song made sense to the others and was her way of communicating and being musical.

If we open our eyes to how all our children ‘speak’ including those with language delay, we can begin to converse or respond in similar ways, thus making the child feel valued and respected.

By offering a range of thoughtful musical offerings we can together, provide focused, reciprocal support. Being visual, physically animated and vocally inviting provides a delightful recipe for successful responses time and again. As early years educators or music specialists, in this context we are not entertaining. Rather, we extend our own sensory mechanisms (seeing, hearing, moving, vocalising) in musically playful ways to reach young children struggling to vocalise or communicate. Throw in emotion with a smattering of space and time, and observe your child’s varied, rich and often unexpected responses.



**Music House for Children** provides musical experiences, lessons and projects to babies, young children and those with needs including language delay, deafness, autism, physical and cognitive disorders.

### **Workshops, Stories, Projects and Training**

Our traditional and bespoke musical storytelling workshops nurture communication, learning, social and musical outcomes. Training courses (twilight and 1-3 days) teach accessible musical skills to support those working in the early years sector without the need for a music or instrumental qualification. Visit <https://www.musichouseforchildren.com/whats-on> and <https://www.musichouseforchildren.com/training> Illustrative music books complete with a cd and downloads provide playful, rich musical activities for families and early years settings. Our instruments were created with young children's motor and multi-sensory development in mind. All available on Amazon or <https://www.musichouseforchildren.com/shop>

### **Appendix**

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Emma Hutchinson  
E: [emma@musichouseforchildren.com](mailto:emma@musichouseforchildren.com)  
W: [musichouseforchildren.com](http://musichouseforchildren.com)  
00 44 (0)20 8932 2652