

The benefits of children's shared musical activities in the home to their later formal learning | Carolyn Blackburn, Birmingham City University

Abstract:

This paper reports on a study that explores the benefits of young children's shared musical activities in the home to their later learning. Existing literature has been strengthened with family interviews to explore current trends in family practices relating to young children's musical experiences. The findings suggest that there are benefits to children's pro-social and physical development from participating in shared musical activities, and there are also there are benefits to relationships in families. In contrast to previous studies, participants in this study reported that children engage in musical activities every day in the home. However, they also participate in organised musical activities outside the home. Further research into the nature and quality of organised musical activities outside the home is needed.

Keywords:

curriculum, family, music, parents, relational pedagogy

Introduction

The English Early Years Foundation Stage¹ places music as an activity to be promoted under expressive arts and design as a 'specific' area of learning, whilst communication and literacy is a 'prime' area of learning, even though early sound discrimination promoted by music activities is a foundational step for phonic and vocabulary development. Furthermore the emphasis on language acquisition in early childhood as well as the basic skills of literacy and numeracy means that practitioners and researchers are required to explicitly demonstrate the efficacy of music in supporting children's wider learning rather than appreciating children's creative

¹ Department for Education, Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework-2> [accessed: 06.06.2014].

competencies². This paper seeks to explore the benefits of shared musical activities in the home to children's later learning from existing literature and interviews with parents.

Shared musical activities

Shared music activities between adults and children serve the function of 'signs' or 'cultural tools' as parents and carers use the conventions of songs and nursery rhymes to build their child's understandings of cultural conventions³. Grandparents also have an important role to play in co-constructing knowledge with young children in episodes of reciprocal learning opportunities afforded by musical activities⁴ stressing the role of guided participation⁵. Urie Bronfenbrenner⁶ stressed the influence of the multiple integrative contexts on children's development and the relationships between them from proximal processes of adult-child social interactions in micro context of home and early years settings to the macro influence of policy contexts. Therefore the interpretation of macro level policy intentions at the micro level of home and early years settings in relation to how adults prioritise particular activities and opportunities for young children is of interest.

Parents play a foundational role in nurturing young children's development including participation in music. Arguably, parents from musical backgrounds are more likely to provide opportunities for participation in musical activities for their children, especially infants⁷. However, this does not lead to the conclusion that parents without a musical background do not provide such opportunities.

A study of shared music activities provided in the home for children under the age of five, (n 63) found that despite parents reporting that they valued the benefit of music for children's development, only 18% of parents played music to their children daily, 9% sang to or with their children daily, 14% encouraged musical play with their children, 11% played instruments with their children and none encouraged their children to

2 S. Young, "Changing tune. Reconceptualising music with under three year olds", *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 2007, 13:3, pp. 289–303.

3 L. Vygotsky, *Interaction between learning and development in Mind and Society*, Cambridge 1978.

4 P. de Vries, "Intergenerational music making. A phenomenological study of three older Australians making music with children", *Journal of Research in Music Education*, 2012, no. 59 (4), pp. 339–356.

5 B. Rogoff, *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*, Oxford 2003.

6 U. Bronfenbrenner, *The ecology of cognitive development. Research models and fugitive findings*, [in:] *Development in context. Acting and thinking in specific environments*, eds. R.H. Wozniak, K.W. Fisher, Hillsdale 1993, pp. 3–44.

7 P. de Vries, "Music at home with the under fives. What is happening?", *Early Child Development and Care*, 2009, vol. 179, 4, pp. 395–405; B. Ilari, "On Musical parenting in the home of young children. Musical beliefs and behaviours of mothers and infants", *Early Child Development and Care*, 2005, vol. 175, no. 7–8, pp. 647–660; L.A. Custodero, P.R. Britto, T. Xin, "From Mozart to Motown, lullabies to love songs", *Zero to Three*, 2002, no. 23 (1), pp. 41–46.

create/make up their own music. Although nearly half (49%) of parents played instruments with their children once a week or less and a similar percentage encouraged children to create their own music, they also reported that children's participation in musical activities was something that was best organised outside the home due to their own musical incompetence, as exemplified by these statement from focus group participants:

I had one of my kids go through pre-school two years ago and.. they just love music. They seem to do it every day there, so it's covered. This is lucky because I'm so unmusical. I'm no musician, just like I'm no scientist or maths whiz. So I don't do those things with my children, that's what their teachers do. But I do read to my kids – everyone does, you know how important that is, the whole literacy thing⁸.

A longitudinal Australian study that used a large dataset (5,107 children) from the Infant Cohort of the Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) study (parent reports)⁹ aimed to identify the benefits of shared musical activities in the home and any associations between frequency of these activities and later outcomes for children in comparison shared reading activities. On analysing data from children's participation in activities at age two to three years and later outcomes at four to five years, his findings suggest that the frequency of shared parent-child music activities (in common with shared reading activities) correlate positively with children's later prosocial skills, vocabulary, numeracy and attentional and emotional regulation. The study further found that shared music activities were more strongly associated with later prosocial skills than shared reading activities. Williams and colleagues also point out the possible additional benefits of shared music that relate to the physical and multi-sensory nature of musical activities that might promote intersubjectivity and development of children's fine and gross motor skills.

Aims of this study

This project reported here sought to explore the views, understanding and reported practices of interested stakeholders in young children's musical interactions in home and out-of-home early years settings. This phase of the project focused on children's experiences in the home.

⁸ P. de Vries, "Music at home...", p. 398.

⁹ K.E. Williams [et al.], "Associations between early shared music activities in the home and later child outcomes. Findings from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children", *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 2015, no. 21, pp. 113–124.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted that involved survey and interviews. An online survey was designed and trialled with three parents and carers of children aged birth to five before being formally launched and advertised using existing networks and social media. Following this parents were invited to participate in an interview to explore emerging themes in more detail. Parents were asked about the families' musical background, the nature, frequency, context and parent/child preferences of children's musical activities in the home as well as barriers and benefits. They were also asked about children's participation in organised musical activities outside the home. This paper will report on findings from the interviews.

The ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) were followed at all times with regard to consent, anonymity, right to withdraw, storage of data, researcher conduct and equality. The project was approved by the Faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences Ethics Committee at Birmingham City University. All participants provided informed consent and were reminded of their right to withdraw before interviews and observations commenced. Participants' identities were protected by the use of pseudonyms. Data were stored securely on University equipment and analysed thematically in order to reduce bias.

Data were analysed to answer the research questions at the first level allowing common and discrepant themes to emerge subsequently. Research questions identified *a priori* themes and thereafter emerging themes were identified.

Results

Five parents agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview. All five were female and aged between 31 and 40 years old. Four were parents and one was a grandparent and foster carer.

a) Family musical background

Two participants reported that they had a strong musical background. One of these participants stated that both she and her partner were music teachers and she reported that her partner plays an instrument in a band. Another participant reported that although she did not have a musical background, the family had a strong theatrical background, including dancing and singing, which had increased her experience of, and interest

in, music. The remaining two participants stated that neither they or their partners or wider family members were particularly musical.

b) Musical activities in the home – context, frequency and location

In terms of defining music in the home, two participants described this in terms of family practices stressing that music is “part of everyday life” and “part of everyday routines” such as feeding, hygiene routines and food preparation routines. In this regard, music was useful for calming, communicating with and motivating children. Four participants described music in the home in terms of instruments and singing and the range of musical instruments (both toy and real instruments) that were available for their child, whilst the remaining parent stressed the rhythms and patterns that inhered in nursery rhymes as being a significant part of her child’s music in the home.

Children’s musical activities in the home were reported to occur daily and were described by participants in four categories of playing instruments (five participants), singing (three participants), listening to music (three participants) and listening to and reciting nursery rhymes (two participants). The range of musical instruments (both and toy and real) that children had access to in the home was broad.

Whilst two parents stated that musical activities occur mainly in the playroom or the lounge and kitchen, all parents reported that music activities could occur “anywhere” and everywhere” including in the car, where music could be a distraction to boring car journeys. There were, however, particular times of the day where there was an increased likelihood of music (especially singing) for younger children (birth to two years old). These included bath-time, bed-time, waiting for food to cook, feeding times, hygiene routines such as nappy changing:

If I am stuck in traffic I find either singing or telling a story with sound effects is a good way of distracting them from a boring experience... for babies it’s about fun, they swing their bodies in time to the music, in line with the music spontaneously.

Once children matured beyond infancy and toddlerhood, three parents reported that children were more likely to prefer stories to singing and nursery rhymes. One parent emphasised the role of technology in enhancing children’s musical experiences:

I think family time is very different now, it’s very easy to plug children into a TV or put the ipad in front of them and I think they’re getting music that way.

c) Barriers to children's musical activities in the home

Three parents mentioned parents or children's lack of confidence in music (especially in relation to the use of instruments) as a potential barrier to children's participation in musical activities. It was stressed by one of these parents that this barrier could be mediated to some extent by parent and toddler groups in encouraging parents to "join in" and "have a go":

I think one of the main barriers is confidence with parents in instigating music making. I really like what all the toddler groups offer in terms of encouraging parents to do things, you don't have to have an amazing voice and music can be as cheap or as expensive as you want it to be – the only barriers are those that people put in the way.

One parent stated that other toys could be a distraction, especially if too many toys were available to children, and the remaining parent reported that cost of instruments and/or lack of parental interest in music could be a barrier. One parent suggested that a database of online resources be available for parents so that they could easily find videos and other resources to share with their children that had been professionally trialled and validated.

d) The role of adults and peers/siblings

Parents described their own role in their children's musical activities in the home in a number of ways. Three parents felt their role was to join in with whatever their child initiated, whilst two others said reported that their role was to initiate musical activities for their child to join in with. Three parents stressed their teaching role in their child's musical activities in terms of modelling enjoyment of music and correct use of instruments. One parent each stressed the important role for parents in facilitating participation in musical activities and praising children for their "music making". All parents described the role of peers and siblings as providing opportunities for socialisation in musical activities.

e) Favourite musical activities

In describing children's favourite musical activities, parents related a range of activities that including singing, using percussion instruments, reading nursery rhyme books with CDs. In contrast all parents reported their own preference for singing with their child above other musical activities, although one parent added that she preferred musical nursery rhymes that involve movement and interaction:

[I like] anything that has gestures and movement because I like turning off the TV and engaging them in that way. For example, "row, row, row your boat" when E was born was a great motivator to do my stomach exercise, so it was multi-purpose. It's so easy to do and involves direct interaction, singing together and doing all the gestures and I like making up new versus by looking at things around the room, I think that's the most fun.

f) Benefits of children's participation in musical activities in the home

Parents described the benefits of children's participation in music in diverse ways. For example, two parents discussed the benefits for children's sense of enjoyment and contribution to their communication development. Also mentioned by one parent each was that music participation in music offers distinctive benefits in terms of inclusion, participation, calming, soothing, engagement and adult-child interaction "on a different level". In addition one parent mentioned the use of music 'apps' to support parent-child relationships by recording her voice for her child to play back when she was absent from the home.

g) Musical activities outside the home

All parents reported that their child either currently attended organised musical activities outside the home or they were considering enrolling their child for them in the future.

Typical costs reported by parents ranged from £1.00 per session for parent and toddler groups to £5.00 per session for specialist music groups and parents travelled a range of distances from one mile to ten miles. The perceived benefits for children and parents in attending musical activities outside the home were reported as socialisation benefits and children's confidence reported by two parents and children's music education by another two. The remaining parent stated that she and her child had gained a repertoire of songs and rhymes that they could practice at home and stressed that many parents attending musical activities with their child had little prior knowledge of rhymes and songs to engage in with their child. In this sense, organised musical activities provided an important social and relationship function for families. However, one parent expressed concern about qualifications and knowledge held by professionals who organised music groups. She was unsure whether they had sufficient knowledge of child development or whether there were any safeguarding procedures that were required.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has reported on the findings from semi-structured interviews with parents, grandparents and foster carers of children aged birth to five residing in England. Interviews allowed for emerging themes from the survey to be explored in more depth. However, it would have been beneficial to interview a more significant sample.

Only two parents that were interviewed had musical backgrounds. In interviews parents' reports of the benefits of children's participation in musical activities in the home varied widely from inclusion and participation to calming and soothing.

In contrast to previous studies¹⁰ young children in this study were participating in musical activities daily in most cases and in almost all cases at least weekly. The range of musical activities was wide and adults were joining in with children's musical activities. Given the associations between the frequency of shared musical activities and children's later prosocial skills, vocabulary, numeracy and attentional and emotional regulation previously identified¹¹ this is an important finding.

Participants in this study appeared to recognise the value and importance of children's spontaneous musical activities and to encourage it describing the benefit for children's holistic development and the role of music in attachment and bonding. However, in common with de Vries's study, they also appear to have identified benefits for children in attending organised, structured musical activities both within the home, but more substantially outside the home. In interviews it appeared that this was related to children's musical development and building parents' and children's confidence to participate. It was interesting that only one parent in interview expressed concern about the nature and quality of professional qualifications needed to organise musical activities for young children and parents as this was a matter of concern raised¹² and one participant in this study.

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¹⁰ P. de Vries, "Music at home..."

¹¹ K.E. Williams [et al.], op. cit.

¹² S. Young, op. cit.

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Korzyści ze wspólnych czynności muzycznych wykonywanych przez dzieci w domu w nawiązaniu do ich późniejszego formalnego nauczania

Streszczenie:

W artykule opisano studium, które analizuje zalety wspólnych działań muzycznych małych dzieci w domu w kontekście ich późniejszego formalnego uczenia się. W celu zbadania aktualnych trendów w praktyce rodzinnej, odnoszących się do muzycznych doświadczeń małych dzieci, wykorzystano analizę literatury i wywiady rodzinne. Badania ukazują, że udział we wspólnych zajęciach muzycznych jest korzystny nie tylko dla rozwoju społeczno-fizycznego dziecka, lecz także dla wzmacniania relacji w rodzinie. W przeciwieństwie do wcześniejszych badań stwierdzono, że dzieci codziennie biorą udział w rodzinnych zajęciach muzycznych. Uczestniczą one również w zorganizowanych zajęciach muzycznych poza domem. Niezbędne są dalsze badania nad naturą i jakością zorganizowanej działalności muzycznej poza domem.

Słowa kluczowe:

muzyka, program nauczania, rodzice, rodzina