

# EARLY YEARS MUSIC RESOURCE

## OUR FUTURE CITY

### Tina Warnock

#### Why Singing is Good for You

Most of us have heard that 'singing is good for you'. For some of us this makes immediate sense—we know how good we feel when we sing, whether alone or in a group; it allows us to connect with how we're feeling and express ourselves, and sometimes it can shift us out of one mood into another. For others there is a disconnect—we understand that singing can be good for you but have not felt the benefits for ourselves; we either don't sing (perhaps we were told it doesn't sound good), or don't like the sound of our voice when we do.

Every individual's history has a powerful part to play in their relationship with their voice, often going back to childhood when our patterns and expectations of ourselves and others are formed. But whatever our own experience as children, it is important that as parents, carers and child-care professionals we encourage the children in our care to grow up with the feeling that they can sing and that singing is for everyone.

#### It's in our DNA!

Our ability to sing is part of what makes us human – it's in our DNA due to the success of the early groups of humans who sang over those who didn't and gives us a 'fitness advantage'. Research has found that historically mothers who sang were healthier and more likely to grow up and pass on their genes than those who didn't so this alongside the vocal relationship between these mothers and their babies has played an important part in our survival. The vocal relationship works in both directions – the melodic cooing and basic cries of the baby keep the mother nearby so she can and wants to take care of its needs, and the mother's voice has the effect of 'holding' the baby emotionally so that she can use her hands for other things. (Norton 2016)

New-born babies can recognise their mother's voice as soon as they are born, and sometimes the father's too if they have been close by in the last four months of the pregnancy (when foetuses can hear). These days, Dads are making use of modern technology to connect with their babies in the womb, using the special microphones which can be placed on the belly so they can sing a song or read a story. Recognising these familiar voices at birth sets the new-born baby up to form healthy bonds with its parents.

#### This is me!

From an individual point of view, our voice, like our face, is unique and belongs only to us. The process of hearing our voice and beginning to recognise it as our own is fundamentally linked to the development our sense of self. First, we instinctively use it to express our needs, then we begin to explore what it can do through babbling – many babies get a lot of pleasure from experimenting with their mouth shapes, vocal sounds and breathing mechanism. When they realise the control they have over it and the effect it has on others, they begin to use it to make their presence known. As time goes by and they learn to differentiate between different sounds and understand their symbolic meaning, this leads to their first words. (Malloch & Trevathen 2009, Warnock 2011)

#### When we sing too

The most potent way to encourage children to sing is for us to sing with them with confidence and enthusiasm. There is no denying that many of us find this difficult, especially when with other adults, but pushing through our inhibitions and daring to sing out ourselves reaps many rewards. If it is just too uncomfortable, experimenting alone in the car or in the bath often feels the safest. There are many community choirs out there which



accept singers of all levels and background – this is a great way to build up the strength in our voices and hence our confidence singing with others. It may also be worth investing in a few singing lessons so that you start on the right track and maximise the benefits by breathing correctly from the diaphragm.

If you want to give it a go, click on the link for a basic singing exercise: <https://soundcloud.com/user-259229046/simple-vocal-exercises>

So, we can see that singing between parents/carers and their babies serves a strong purpose of its own in terms of healthy relationship building and that vocalising plays an important part in developing a child's self-confidence.

We will now go on to look at how regular singing can go on to contribute to all aspects of a child's development, particularly in the areas of:

- Personal, Social and Emotional Development
- Communication and Language
- Physical Development
- Creative Development

(Warnock 2012)

### Personal, Social and Emotional Development

Presenting children with opportunities to sing at home, nursery, school or out and about in everyday life can make a significant difference to their general sense of connectedness and emotional wellbeing by supporting their:

- Curiosity in their environment
- Motivation to listen
- Ability to concentrate
- Sense of playfulness

Since we are all born with an in-born musicality, a child's natural interest in melody and rhythm draws them in to shared musical experiences. There's something about a singing voice which children find intrinsically more interesting than a speaking voice – this is linked to 'motherese', a style of speech which most adults naturally use when interacting with a baby. Voices go up in pitch and become much more musical to attract and hold the baby's attention. The resulting eye contact and connection between the carer and baby has an immediate effect on the growth of neural pathways in the brain, like fireworks! They can explore a wide range of feelings with their vocal sounds and the parent/carers helps the baby to feel his emotional experiences are normal and manageable. The baby can also begin to develop a sense of humour at this early non-verbal stage which has a big impact on their capacity for relating to others, and their emotional resilience.

When a child has not had the opportunity to engage in this kind of intimate vocal exchange regularly, due to an illness or condition in the baby or parent/carers it can affect their whole experience of relationships and ability to regulate their emotions. The brain, instead of growing rich and creative neural pathways which allow social and emotional skills to thrive, becomes dominated by the 'fight or flight' mode and the child experiences poor concentration, poor emotional regulation and high levels of anxiety. A significant mismatch in the child's needs and what the environment can provide can mean that a child's social skills do not develop 'normally', and they have less curiosity in themselves, the people around them, and their learning environment.

One of the unique qualities of singing and music-making is that it activates and stimulates the entire brain rather than just one section, so can help to build and reinforce the connections needed for healthy development. Children who are shy or low in confidence can also be helped by singing as long as there is no direct pressure on them to join in until they are ready. The value of the joint attention and shared enjoyment found through singing together cannot be underestimated in terms of providing a positive social experience without the pressure to use words. Research has shown that singing with others:

- Promotes a sense of trust and social bonding due to the release of oxytocin, the 'trust' hormone.
- Relieves stress – when we sing, endorphins such as serotonin are released into the bloodstream which help reduce feelings of anxiety and promote a sense of wellbeing.

Please click on the link for a simple singing and movement activity that can be done with children sitting on laps: <https://soundcloud.com/user-259229046/tw-bounce-stop> (Malloch & Trevarthan 2009, Norton 2016, Warnock 2011, Warnock 2012)

### Communication and Language

As with social and emotional development, effective verbal communication involves many non-verbal elements: The musical elements of communication include a sense of:

- Pitch
- Rhythm
- Inflection
- Phrasing
- Pauses
- Tone
- Intensity (louds and softs)

And non-musical elements of communication include:

- Attention and listening
- Concentration
- Eye-contact
- Turn-taking
- Anticipation

Well judged songs and musical activities can offer children all the building blocks they need for effective communication as they include many or all the elements listed above. The children's natural awareness of the musical voice engages them fully in the activity, especially when a song is combined with physical actions to reinforce the experience in the body. They can learn the words through repetition and may even be able to sing them back as sounds before they fully understand their meaning.

Hearing lullabies, rhymes and songs around them prepares a child's ear, voice and brain for the language they have been born into, well before they can speak. Attending singing groups regularly allows parents and children to integrate into their community and discover their similarities and differences within a musical framework, even if they have a different language.

Sometimes children who are not able to concentrate well in verbally led activities can do so better when the leader uses songs instead. This is partly because singing connects the left and right brain, allowing the verbal and the creative parts to communicate, as mentioned above.

It can be very useful to, for example, change the words of a well-known song to describe a task or activity or even engage children in a conversation. The link shows how you can do this to the well-known tune 'Wheels on the Bus': <https://soundcloud.com/user-259229046/tw-wheels-on-the-bus>

### Varying the musical elements to increase motivation and participation.

To achieve a high level of engagement in the children, it is important that the leader sets the tempo, volume and pitch of the songs to suit the children's needs and abilities. It also helps to keep these elements fluid and vary them to keep engagement to the maximum if necessary. For example, you might start by singing a song slowly in the key of C, then increasing the speed and going up to D to maintain the attention. You might go even further and go up again to E, racing faster and higher than they can keep up with to bring in some humour before dropping it back to the original speed and volume.

Being confident and playful in our own musical leadership encourages the same qualities in the children.

Click on the link to hear how a simple nursery rhyme can be varied to maintain children's interest and participation for longer: <https://soundcloud.com/user-259229046/tw-twinkle-twinkle-little-star-variations>

## Physical Development

As babies, our emotions are primarily experienced in our bodies and we communicate our needs effectively through our movements and vocal sounds. As our cognitive ability and self-awareness grow, we begin to place rules and restrictions on our self-expression to fit with the expectations of others and how we interpret these. Sometimes, this means that as we get older our singing voice gets lost or forgotten about as we become more reliant on expressing ourselves with words. It can also mean that some of the muscle groups within our vocal mechanism (reaching from the facial muscles to the pelvic floor) become weak or tight which affects our physical (and emotional) wellbeing.

The extent of this varies across different cultures, as opportunities to sing within our communities varies enormously and some cultures place strong value judgements on a 'good' or a 'bad' voice. In a world where we are surrounded by such highly produced recorded music it is not surprising that so many people describe themselves as 'unmusical'.

But as research into the physiological and emotional effects of singing improves in quality, we are gaining a much better understanding of how singing can be beneficial throughout our lives. As well as promoting the release of 'happy hormones' such as oxytocin and serotonin, we now know that singing also:

- Boosts the immune system, by lowering cortisol and adrenaline levels and producing 'cytokines', compounds which allow white blood cells to communicate with each other. (Fancourt 2016)
- Slows the heart rate down through deeper more regular breathing.
- Causes the muscles in the diaphragm and around the lungs to work harder, allowing the lungs to function more efficiently; regular deep breathing through singing can increase lung capacity. This is helped by the abdomen becoming more relaxed too.

(Norton 2016)

## Creative Development

By enabling children to develop in the areas of personal, social and emotional skills and language and communication, singing and music making is also providing children with a strong foundation for their own creativity. The sense of identity that they build up within their musical experience gives them confidence to express their needs and wishes more clearly and feel a stronger connection with the people around them, and with their environment.

## In Summary

We have seen that our voices are intrinsic to our development even before we are born; singing plays a very important part in our ability to build relationships when we are young, maintain physical and mental health as we grow up and function within our communities across the life span. Singing is in our DNA and its up to us whether we use this to our advantage by incorporating it into our everyday lives or allow these golden opportunities to pass us by.

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## **References**

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