

# Music And Movement In Early Learning



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Suite 301  
641 W. Lake Street  
Chicago, IL 60661

800.203.7060  
800.327.1443  
[www.magnasystems.com](http://www.magnasystems.com)





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Please contact us with any questions or concerns at:

Magna Systems  
Suite 301  
641 W. Lake Street  
Chicago, IL 60661

800.203.7060  
800.327.1443

info@magnasystems.com  
www.magnasystems.com



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### SUMMARY

*“The young child doesn’t separate music and art and dance ... All of that goes together, it’s a part of life. If you just observe them in nature, they dance, they sing, they ... it’s all play, and it’s all part of the world for them.”*

When young children hear music, their natural inclination is to move their bodies in response to it. Research has shown that this movement, like the music itself, is an integral factor in the brain’s and the body’s healthy development. Music is an invaluable learning tool by itself, but its impact is vastly enhanced when it is joined with movement. *Music and Movement in Early Learning* explains what research has shown us about the importance of combining movement with music in early learning environments.

#### **Explore:**

- How fetuses as young as five months respond to music by blinking or moving to the beat.
- How studies have shown that early movement experiences are essential to optimizing brain development.
- How babies naturally want to clap along or move to the music they hear.
- How studies have shown that, when music and movement are used together, learning improves.
- How the body is the primary learning center, and how music/movement games and exercises increase the body’s capability.
- How keeping the beat is related to sensing the cadence of language.
- How song with movement helps children develop “inner speech” and, with it, impulse control.
- Why movement games and exercises don’t have to be specialized activities reserved for the playground or gym. They can be used across the curriculum, with or without musical accompaniment.
- How, when children sing and dance together, they bond together and learn from each other.

## OVERVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

Music can play an invaluable role in furthering the intellectual development of young children. And as any parent or teacher knows, wherever there are children and music, there's usually movement too. Children rarely just *listen* to music. When they sing together or hear a jaunty song they enjoy, children can't help themselves. They seem to simply have to move, to clap their hands, to dance and skip and sway. This urge is part of their genetic inheritance. In fact, **researchers have found that at as early as five months, fetuses respond to music by blinking or moving to the beat.** Surrounded by the primal rhythmic sounds of their mother's breathing, heartbeat and blood rush, they're afloat in a small sea of rhythms from their earliest days.

### MOVEMENT FROM BEFORE BIRTH

In the womb, music is there. The baby in the womb feels the pulse from the mother's heart. Indeed, **music is one of the earliest forms of math.** The sound we hear as we're being born is our mother's heartbeat, and as babies we know our mother's heartbeat as our very first rhythm.

### MOVEMENT AND RHYTHM

Rhythm is, essentially, a basic form of math. **When a child learns about rhythm, it is learning about patterns.** Ask your students, "how do you make the drum beat the same way that I'm making the drum beat?" "What pattern am I making? How can you make your pattern match my pattern?" As children get older, the rhythms can grow in complexity.

Aside from intrinsic rhythm, music is a wonderful way to teach other sorts of math. Counting songs, "adding and subtracting" songs such as "one elephant went out to play, now we have another one..." – these can provide easy, simple ways for children to learn basic math skills without even realizing they're learning.

In pre-kindergarten and the early primary grades, movement is encouraged, often to music. The **music affects children viscerally; they move instinctively, and so the concept of meter may be introduced.** A song with a strong "3" feel will have the students prancing in 3. One with a march feel will generally find children marching in 2 or 4.

### A NATURAL DRIVE

Moving in response to music comes as naturally to babies and young children as playing. **The young child doesn't separate music and art and dance.**

When children play, they're making sense of the world around them and the information which is incessantly being presented to them. It is the whole child which experiences this world, and this is why the whole child needs to be involved in the learning process. Allowing them to move freely, to use their voices freely, to explore by touching and feeling and experimenting, enables the child to learn to his or her whole ability.

### LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

When parents rock their babies to music or bounce them on their knees, they are promoting the connection between hearing and feeling that's necessary to later steady beat independence. **They are helping their children learn rhythm and cadence, which are fundamental aspects of language as well as music.** As this is best developed by age three, preschool teachers can play a crucial role in this development too.

Adults who haven't much experience with music can still help youngsters learn. Drums or other percussive instruments are simple, yet marvelously effective. Percussion takes one to the very basics of rhythm.

#### Tip:

No instruments necessary! Body percussion can work just as well: slapping your leg, tapping your head, popping your cheek – anything which makes a sharp, clear sound.

Another possibility is to fill a hollow plastic egg, or a film container, with popcorn or rice. These impromptu shakers make excellent instruments for little hands.

Pick a subject or concept, compose an impromptu blues song about it, and your students will remember it. The intrinsic connection between the two sides of the brain does your teaching for you. The music, the rhythm, take root and carry with them the meaning behind and beyond your tune.

### KINESTHETIC LEARNING

Playing with rhythm has other advantages. Research has shown that a child's vestibular system, which is the part of the ear related to balance and movement, must be activated for learning to take place. Children do much themselves to activate it—learning to crawl and sit up and then walk, most of all. **But you can enhance the mental development of your preschoolers and kindergarteners by using movement exercises set to rhythmic music, which is a form of kinesthetic learning.**

A key thing for educators and parents to remember is that **kinesthetic learning is tied to movement and motion**, and that movement and motion become embedded in a child's memory. It's been shown that preschool children, when asked to give verbal responses, respond much more powerfully and accurately if they're able to respond with kinesthetic movement and visual responses. For the creative teacher, this fact opens up wonderful opportunities for making learning lively and fun.

### CROSS-LATERAL MOVEMENT

Crawling is important to babies' development because it involves cross-lateral movement (movement from one side of the body to the other). **When the brain learns to coordinate movement cross-laterally, it is also developing an ability that prepares children for reading and writing.** Why? Because in order to read and write, a person must scan from one side of the paper to the other.

Are schools attempting to teach children to read before they're "ready"? When children "should" be taught to read is a matter currently under debate. The kinesthetic movement, and inclusion of the visual arts, enters into the discussion and the debate over that issue.

When a person reads text, words are encoded and decoded in the mind. A part of that process can be enhanced with the kinesthetic movement that occurs when a person reads – the movement of the eyes, the side-to-side turning of the head.

**If you take any art and combine it with another – for example, adding movement to singing – the memory process is enriched.** The song is not simply heard aurally, but "seen" or "performed" through one's own movement, and perhaps the movement of one's peers. This is very age-appropriate for preschoolers, first-graders, all young children. Adults enjoy and benefit from these processes too, but the impact is particularly influential for our little ones.

#### Tip:

Use movement songs! "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider" is a good one. Children make motions with their hands, "walk" with their fingers, and can use the whole body as they sing.

The "high", "medium" and "low" concepts can also be easily taught through movement songs. Loud voices mean stand up high! Quiet voices mean huddle down low. Children learn the concepts behind the words as they act out the motions with the song.

### NEURAL STIMULATION

For young children, the body is the primary learning center. Thanks to new insights in brain research, we know that **early movement experiences are essential for the brain's optimal development.** Like music, they provide the neural stimulation children need for their brains to develop fully.

When children are asked to sit and absorb knowledge through simply listening to or watching a teacher, the brain is relatively dormant. Such sedentary activity doesn't develop new synapses in the brain in the way that interactive, artistic participation does. Instead of increasing a child's ability to learn by requiring him to sit still and be quiet, a parent or teacher who makes such a demand is actually interfering with it.

### MODALITIES OF LEARNING

Like musical ability, *movement ability*, or *kinesthesia*, is one of the seven forms of intelligence education researcher **Howard Gardner** says we all possess. For babies and young children who are learning to walk, run and accomplish things with their bodies, this is in many ways the most important form of intelligence.

*Kinesthetic learning* can be easily misunderstood by those unfamiliar with the term. It does not imply a free-for-all, with children running about in wild abandon. Rather, it refers to movements directly associated with the concept being taught or presented. It's the channeling together of the movement and the concept that leads to kinesthetic learning.

**The two sides of the brain may be described as *affective* and *cognitive*.** Kinesthetic learning is tied to the affective domain. Many of the traditional teaching techniques, by contrast, focus heavily on the cognitive side of the brain, on verbal and numerical tasks – in part, because these skills are more easily quantified and measured by tests. It is more difficult to quantify the benefits gained through kinesthetic or other learning geared toward the affective domain, as these are tied to emotions, feelings, and attitudes.

### MUSIC AND TRANSITION TIMES

Movement doesn't have to be a specialized activity reserved for the playground or gym. It can be used across the curriculum, with or without musical accompaniment.

In schools or centers with large numbers of children, transition times – that is, the times between activities, when children are finishing one activity and going on to another, perhaps even physically moving from one area to another – can be hectic. Many teachers have found it useful during these periods to engage the children in singing, either straight singing or some sort of singing game. The benefit here is it brings the children together and gains their focus as a group, easing their way into the next activity.

**Tip:**

Try putting directions to song!

If you want your group of students to move quietly from one area to another, try singing quietly, “When those kids, come tiptoeing down the hall, when those kids go tiptoeing down the hall, when those kids go tiptoeing down the hall...” Let them tiptoe in time.

For something a bit more spirited, think more along the lines of old cheerleading chants or march tunes. “Innovative kids, let’s go, let’s go! Innovative kids, let’s go! Innovative kids, line up, line up! Innovative kids come to circle! Sit right down!”

**When children sing and play together, they learn from each other.** They mimic each other’s ways of singing and moving, and they play off each other, all in a spirit of having fun. Teachers are happy too, because they know their students are learning from each other, learning how to interact as a member of a community. And that’s an important part of the work they do.

## SINGING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

*Before birth...*children still in the womb experience and respond physically to music and the rhythms of their mother’s body.

*After birth...*babies have a natural urge to dance and sway and clap their hands when they hear music.

*As infants...*they use their bodies to learn to crawl and walk, and in doing so they develop their vestibular systems and their brains in ways that prepare them for later skills such as reading and writing.

Teachers can help their students by initiating music and movement exercises in the classroom to measurably enhance the little ones’ mental and physical development. They can invent simple word, letter and number songs that emphasize rhythm and beat. Most children are not ready to read or write until they are about seven years old, but the music-making and dancing their teachers lead them in during their younger years sets the stage for later success in this area and others.

## QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES FOR DISCUSSION

1. The program discusses the fact that the mother's heartbeat is a baby's first introduction to rhythm. What other sounds in nature create their own rhythms? How do you respond when you hear a natural rhythm, either physically or emotionally? What do you think this says about human responses to rhythm?
2. When you hear different kinds of music, how do you respond physically? For instance, does swing music make you want to dance? Does folk music make you want to sing and sway? Does techno find you tapping your toes? Why do you think you have the responses you do?
3. Based on your answers to Question #2, what types of music would you use in the classroom to induce certain responses from your students? What would you use if you wanted to excite them? Or to calm them down?
4. How might teachers effectively incorporate kinesthetic learning in their lesson plans? What subjects and what activities would be enhanced by this method of learning?
5. Pair up and practice creating rhythms using nothing but your voice and body. When all the pairs have perfected their rhythms, try combining two pairs' rhythms together. How many rhythms can you combine? Would you call the end result an 'orchestra'?
6. Back in your original pairs, have one partner produce a rhythm while the other creates a corresponding motion. Share these with the other pairs. What different sorts of rhythms do you hear, and what movements have you come up with? Do you see more similarities among pairs, or more differences? Why do you think this is?

## ACTIVITY: CREATING A LESSON PLAN

In pairs or small groups, discuss ways you can use movement and music in daily lesson plans. Propose a lesson plan in each of the following categories, and describe the type of physical activity and accompanying song or musical style which would enhance the lesson or concept being taught. Which styles seem to fit with which subjects?

1. Math or Counting

2. Colors

3. Cooperation

4. History

5. Memorization (e.g., dates, formulas, the digits of Pi)

6. Science

FOR MORE INFORMATION...

BOOKS & ARTICLES

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LINKS

Early Childhood Music and Movement Association (ECMMA)     <http://www.ecmma.org/>

Head Start: Movement Songs     <http://www.headstart.lane.or.us/education/activities/music/songs-movement.html>

Kindermusik     <http://www.kindermusik.com/>

Perpetual Preschool: Music and Movement     <http://www.perpetualpreschool.com/music.html>

RITMÌA     [http://www.metodo-ritmia.com/home\\_ing.htm](http://www.metodo-ritmia.com/home_ing.htm)

Songs for Teaching     <http://www.songsforteaching.com/>