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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2016 VOLUME 38, ISSUE 6, NO. 232 \$10.00

*The Early Childhood Leaders' Magazine Since 1978*



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Beginnings Professional Development Workshop: The Arts

# Lighting a Musical Fire in Children

by Renee Bock

## Developing a Music Mindset for Teaching

I was born with a head full of songs. My parents say I sang before I spoke. Is that unusual? Or are babies wired to make music from birth?

Early educators often feel ambivalent about making music with young children. We know it is good for them, but maybe we don't like to sing. We know young children learn music more easily than adults, but we don't quite know how to get started. Maybe we're thinking, "Music teachers teach music. It's not my responsibility."

I've been singing with young children (birth to five years) for over ten years. I've worked with many teachers in the classroom, as a director, and as a builder of schools with music at the core of the curriculum.

Early childhood teachers often view infants as passive receivers of song. But if you take the time to watch and listen, you will see infants as active and engaged:

- The beat exists within them.
- They focus intensely on sound and how instruments work.
- They look at the faces and hands of musicians.

Babies beam back with expressivity and curiosity at singing adults: kicking, smiling, and crawling towards the music. I was one of those kids. Luckily, my parents were set up to nurture the musical person I would become. But many children don't hear music at home or in school. This 'musical



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desert' has consequences for child development, and for cultivating a thinking and feeling child and a full human experience.

Helping teachers to sing and enjoy singing became a life crusade for me. I was motivated by one central idea: musical childhoods lead to musical lives. Educational psychologist Howard Gardner, an accomplished pianist, knew this when he posited music as one of the eight 'intelligences.' Music, math, language — they are all equally important, as you never know which one might become the most meaningful path to self-actualization.

How can we bring music into a child's daily life? To start, we must move away from a performance model and see ourselves as interactive facilitators, teachers who draw out the music inside our children. The quality of the singing is

Photograph by Rivka Singer



Renee believes that you can 'save the world one guitar at a time' and that music for infants and toddlers is the place to start. She entered the early childhood field with a mission to integrate music into the daily lives of children and has spent the last ten years as a teacher, director, and school builder putting her vision into action. After graduating from Bank Street College in 2007, she taught two- to five-year-olds. She is the Chief Academic Officer for *Explore+Discover* and an early childhood education consultant. She is grateful to her three sons, Ariel (17), Raffi (15), and Shaya (13) for teaching her everything she knows about young children.

# Beginnings Professional Development Workshop

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## The Arts

■ Lighting a Musical Fire in Children

by Renee Bock

■ Becoming the 'Art Lady'

by Julie Rose

■ Sing, Move, Listen, Play:  
The Whole Package Makes It Work

by Leilani Miranda

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irrelevant. (For the record, my father sang entirely out of tune.) To give children a musical start, we need to:

- see music as central to learning.
- realize that children are not judging us.
- acknowledge the importance of social singing.
- use instruments, books, and other props to have fun, and make music a satisfying experience.

I've spent over a decade building musical confidence in teachers and trying to inspire them to sing more, play more, and enjoy more. I hope this article helps you push through fear, take risks, and try something new. It takes a pioneering spirit to light a fire that sweeps music through an entire school and across the span of a child's lifetime.

## All Teachers Can Be Musical With Children

Sometimes what looks like a dead-end is really an open door. When I was a student teacher, the director told me I was doing too much music. "No director will ever hire you," she said. Looking back, I couldn't be more grateful, as I've spent my life disproving her point. Anyone can do it. You can, too. To start, even if you don't play an instrument and have no access to lessons, here are some simple things you can do to make sure your children have a rich musical life at school:

**Talent myth:** You don't have to have talent and you don't need to play an instrument. Children don't know or care whether you sound good. Think of yourself as a musical learner and have fun.

**Circle time:** Even if no teachers play an instrument, you still can have a musical program by doing everything listed here. When you gather, sing. When you have a work time, allow children to select music for listening, and to play instruments and dance. You control when and how loud.

**Music is social and solitary:** The togetherness of

singing is what's important. Children together with children, teachers with teachers, parents with everyone. Communities within communities. Children are entitled to solitary experiences with music as well.

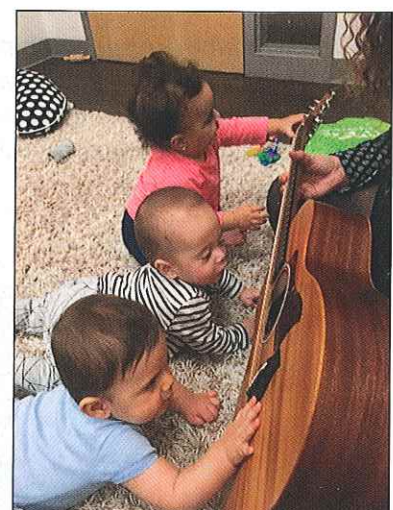
*Photos below: Renee making music with babies at Explore+Discover Early Learning Center*

**Shared listening:** Listening is social, too. Sometimes we sit still and listen, sometimes we dance. We introduce new music, things they won't hear at home. Music controls mood and can be used to transition. You can sing along with music on a playing device if that makes you more comfortable.

**Illustrated songbooks:** Books with lyrics and pictures are a must. These are some of the first books children learn to 'read,' as the repetition and the melody help kids along. English language learners benefit from the strong visuals, predictability, and group dynamic. Make your own songbooks that match words with illustrations. Once the children claim these songs as their own, singing them socially or alone, you know the music has made its way into their hearts.

**Musical materials:** Instruments, puppets, and scarves develop various skills and self-expression. Infants need hands-on exploration and to be free to interrupt when you play instruments. Older children should have jam sessions. Use materials to teach concepts such as sequencing (plastic animals reflecting the order they appear in a song). Accessibility of materials is important. Instruments should be at eye level so children can make choices.

**A springboard for curriculum:** Remind yourself to consider the musical angle when expanding curriculum. Search for songs, send home links for parents to learn them, too.



Photographs by the author

**Music touches emotions:** Use music strategically and sensitively to shift mood, help children calm down, feel better and make transitions, particularly at the start of the school year.

**Invite musical guests:** Your community has musicians who would enjoy singing or playing with your kids and allowing them to explore instruments; skill level is irrelevant. Comfort with children's curiosity is a must. The mechanics of instruments fascinate infants and toddlers. If you have an old violin at home that you don't play, you can still bring it in for children to explore. The sounds they make will interest them intensely.

**Idea to Try:** In our center, we created a program called "Music Before Words" that highlights the musicality of children before they have spoken language. A saxophonist named Jonathan Ragonese visits children twice a month and brings along a musical 'friend' — French horn, tabla, violin, even a giant harp. The musicians improvise and children are invited to come close, press the keys, strum, bow. Some children approach, some stay away, others hold the hand of a teacher as they try something new. You will be amazed at the children's interest, focus, and curiosity. You can institute a similar program in your center with local amateur musicians or parent musicians.

## Directors Make Musical Change

When I moved from teaching to directing, I made music central to school life. When you control the budget, you make things happen! You structure professional development and select materials. You can hire teachers who come in with musical ability, or select ones you think you can nurture along. Here are some things we put in place:

**Mentor/novice relationship:** One guitar-playing teacher standing alone doesn't infuse a school with musical life. Two together feed each other's spirit and this can be transformative. Hiring at least one teacher who plays the



Photographs by the author

Betsy and Elana teaching Guitar Institute at Explore+Discover

guitar can ignite the classroom by inspiring other teachers to learn. If you can hire a musical model for each classroom, even better.

**Weekly sing-along:** A weekly sing-along with parents helps build community. Teachers share the responsibility of introducing songs. Illustrated songbooks are a great prop. Parents bring instruments. Your special repertoire gives the school its unique identity. Sing-alongs in preschools are different from those in infant centers. Preschool teachers are freer to play instruments, as children usually need less immediate care. Infants and toddlers need more constant attention, particularly if walkers and non-walkers attend together. Make sure all children are visible. Close the door, block off areas, and put up gates. Try smaller groups and invite as many parents as possible. Be particularly protective of babies on their backs. At the start of the year a large group may not be possible, so take it slowly.

**Professional development:** Schools should pay for guitar lessons. You can also find lessons and songs on YouTube. It is best for teachers to learn in a group.

**Partnerships:** Our school partnered with a conservatory to host interns who later became consultants. The right partnership can inspire both parties.

**Developmental perspective:** Musical learning looks different for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. If a child doesn't show outward signs of interest, that doesn't mean they aren't engaged. Children observe, practice, and imitate. Music can be private and may end up being shared in the bathtub that night.

**Respect the mood:** Sometimes music is exactly what we need; other times it can be used inappropriately. If a student is comforted by music, that's great. If a sound-sensitive child is distressed, be aware. Silence should also be a part of your day, as children benefit from quiet time to reflect.

**Ideas to Try:** At our center we hosted guitar teachers to work with our staff to learn chords and to build their repertoire. *The Guitar Institute*, led by Betsy Blachly and Elana Steltzer, leads five 1½ hour sessions that include time to learn chord structures, practice strumming, and simply sing together as a group. You can find a local guitar teacher who would be willing to use your space for free and advertise their class for paying customers, including your teachers. The important thing is that the center should pay for teachers to learn enough to get going with a few chords. Once you've got four chords, you can sing most children's folk songs.



## Making Memories

You might find that songs from childhood are recalled easily. Like the smell of your grandmother's baking, or a cozy fireplace at home, musical ideas infuse and shape us at the core. A rich musical life in your school provides a storehouse of memories that students and parents will carry with them forever.

When we sing with children, we aren't trying to discover the next Pavarotti. The goal is more wide ranging. Children enter the world with open brains and the capacity to learn in all domains. It is up to us to help them explore what attracts them, and expand skills where interests lead. When we open the door to music, some children will walk in and out, some will stay momentarily, others will linger, and some will put down elemental roots.

As children's first teachers — and models for parents — we need to have our eye on the broad horizon of the possible, and ensure that music is one of the expressive languages our children speak every day. Music is an invitation to think and feel, to contemplate and express. Playing guitar and singing can spark a fire that burns through early childhood, middle school, and on into adulthood, as it did for me. School by school and teacher by teacher, we ignite children's musical imaginations, planting seeds of possibility. This is what early childhood education is all about.

## Resources

Some of my blogs on music you might find informative:

<http://www.newyorkfamily.com/music-before-words/>

<http://www.newyorkfamily.com/the-magic-of-babies-inner-musical-universe/>

<http://wellroundedny.com/singing-with-babies/>

## Recordings

Pete Seeger's *"Birds, Beasts, Bugs and Fishes (Little and Big)"*

Smithsonian Folkways Children's Collection

Peggy and Mike Seeger's *"American Folk Songs for Children"*

Peggy and Mike Seeger's *"Animal Folk Songs"*

## Books to Sing

*"The Little White Duck"* by Walt Whippo and Bernard Zaritsky

Listen to Burl Ives:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y57RWhz76y8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y57RWhz76y8)

*"The Carrot Seed"* by Ruth Krauss

Listen to Ivan Ulz singing it:

<http://ivanulz.com/product/songs-from-the-old-school-cd/>

*"The Fox Went Out on A Chilly Night"* by Peter Spiers

Listen to Pete Seeger singing it:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=3798TcSq9vY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3798TcSq9vY)



# Becoming the 'Art Lady'

by Julie Rose

My journey of joy with young children, exploring the arts and the wonders of the natural world, led me to a discovery about myself... that the journey was not *just* about what children were learning, but also about the lessons' nature, the children and the teachers who support them, had in store for me.

The children at my granddaughter's preschool had come to regard me as the 'art lady.' I realized how that honorary title boosted my confidence by acknowledging an inner voice that reminded me of *my* own creativity. After all, that was *part* of the reason I had been volunteering for the past two years, schlepping my stash of clay, paints, interesting tools, music, and books to explore with the children.

Undoubtedly, I wanted to spend as much time as possible with my four-year-old grandchild Avery, as well as the teachers I admired, but I also recognized that the time with children was a gift for me; an opportunity to fulfill something in me that needed fulfilling. I believe that if we deny ourselves the opportunity to embrace and immerse ourselves in those things we truly care about, something in us dies. Volunteering was a great opportunity to stay current with early childhood education, my grandchild, and my passion for the arts. I would be proud of my newly acclaimed title and celebrate our time exploring art together, despite the fact that I have never *really* considered myself an artist. I would now embrace the privilege of viewing this opportunity to work with some



Julie Rose is the Organizational Partners Education Director for Dimensions Educational Research Foundation. She works with partners interested in helping organizations support underserved communities to create Nature Explore Classrooms and professional development on the benefits of reconnecting children to the natural world. She has contributed to the research for Dimensions

Foundation as a teacher/co-researcher and to the development of resources including professional development workshops and publications on creating and sustaining natural outdoor environments. Her national and international conference presentations focusing on nature education include NAEYC, NAAEE, Connecting Children with Nature Action Forum, and the World Forum Foundation on Early Care.

very competent and capable young children, not through the lens of a former teacher or mother, but as Avery's Nana... the art lady.

## Setting the Stage

The philosophy at Avery's school is that children need access to open-ended materials (loose parts) that invite them to generate their own creative ideas. The school believes that learning with nature in rich, well-designed settings helps children gain valuable skills across all learning domains. Picture a nature-rich outdoor play environment filled with colorful flowers that spark children's imaginations; trees celebrated for their beauty and shade; spectacular butterflies; striped and dotted insects; and a variety of wildlife for children to safely explore. In addition to the proliferation of nature's beauty, the space has also been designed to support whole-child learning, offering activity areas inviting experiences in art, music, large motor construction, gardening, building, sand and water play, dirt-digging, and climbing. Children are also actively engaged in caretaking tasks, knowing they have a responsibility to keep their classroom alive and healthy.

## The Reflective Teacher

On my first day volunteering, I arrived to see Avery sitting on her teacher's lap, plopped down on the grass in front of a cluster of sunflowers, deep in observation and conversation. It was a great image of a caring relationship between teacher and child, celebrating the beauty of nature together. At that moment I realized that experiences with 'art' can happen in a multitude of ways. Enjoyment modeled by teachers, particularly as they are exploring artistic experiences involving the natural world, has tremendous impact on what children believe and appreciate. Teacher Holly reinforces this idea: