

Infant Guitar Stars

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When I was a guitar-playing pre-K teacher, I was struck by how many kids came to school wearing guitar themed clothing: “I’m with the band;” “When I grow up I wanna rock like my Daddy;” “Rock star in training” “Girls rock.” One year, we had a student that gave Bruce Springsteen a run for his money. Every day, in the block area, he’d build his own stage and enlist friends to sell tickets to his concert. So you could understand why his parents, and those of other kids this age, might reinforce a demonstrated interest through clothing selection. This student identified as a rocker, he loved my guitar, drew pictures of it, sat near it, stroked it, and was really proud of his latest tee-shirt.

But what about guitar-wear donned by infants? Is this just wishful thinking on the part of parents who were raised post Beatles and Rolling Stones? Or is there some genuine connection between the marketing of children’s clothing and a predilection of infants for music, real instruments, and specifically the guitar?

I’m teaching music in an infant toddler program and I see children dressed in guitar-wear all the time—babies! Currently, as we speak, the website [Café Press](#) offers 560 patterns of onesies and bibs sporting guitar themes (click [HERE](#) to check it out). Yes, 560. They include images of classical paintings by Vermeer and Mona Lisa playing the guitar, to sayings like: “Where’s my roadie?” “Lord of the strings;” “What Happens in the Garage Stays in the Garage;” and “Scuse Me While I Kiss The Sky,” a reference to a Jimi Hendrix song. This song is surely a personal favorite of many babies.

On the one hand, the obsession with turning babies into little rockers seems rooted in a superficial drive to make money. On the other it has a basis in a compelling reality. Babies are attracted to guitars like moth to flame. In every class I teach, from 3- to 24-month-olds, the children need, in fact, demand time with the guitar. We give them time to explore alone and in groups, which offer different experiences. Remember, this is the first time they are introduced to the instrument and it is full of wonder and amazement. Through contact with the guitar, infants learn:

- To build crawling skills as they make their way across the room to get to the guitar
- To observe how I make a sound and imitate my motion
- To use their hand to strum, pull strings, grip, and even lift their own body weight thus developing fine and gross motor skills
- To pull themselves to standing using the upright neck
- To bend knees and rock while standing

There are three big lessons that stand out particularly: Every child is a musical agent in the world. They use all their developed physical skills to make music—hitting a drum, shaking a bracelet of bells, dancing with egg shakers. They exude confidence. The joy and pride that arises from meeting goals in self-directed musical play is moving to see.



From the earliest ages, children will be motivated to solve problems and develop wonderful ideas in a musical context. For example, an infant who is mastering movement from back to tummy will find ways to snake around to reach the instrument. Just this week, a 15-month-old directed me to put bracelet bells on our rabbit puppet's arms while we sang "John the Rabbit." An adult wouldn't have considered this use of materials. In another class, while we sang a song about a rooster, duck and pig, a child gave me plastic animals corresponding to the lyrics, revealing amazing listening skills.

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But perhaps most impressive of all, is the way the children are influenced by each other's passion for the guitar. A reserved child who so badly wants to approach the guitar will hang back until he observes friends strumming on several occasions. Watching and waiting, observing and learning, he will suddenly one day participate fully. Some children need to see a friend do something before they see themselves as capable. When I model hand motions to a song, one child will try them and soon everyone is moving their fingers. We hear a lot about children learning from each other, and these early musical experiences provide concrete examples of the power of social learning.

What's key here is that teachers actually give children the time to process what they see and hear. We don't assume an absence of learning just because the children haven't participated with their bodies yet.

For hundreds of years visual artists have been painting and sculpting guitars, tapping into a fundamental human attraction to the instrument. Picasso depicted the guitar in over 70 well known works. Children are not immune to these deep seated aesthetic values. They know the difference between the adult guitar and the children's model. As an educator, a mother, and a human being, I have questions about how children come into the world attracted to the guitar and with the capacity to move in rhythm, play soft or loud along with what they hear etc. Before they have words, they speak the language of music.

Many parents actively inculcate musical values in their children from birth. They do it by joining a music class, bringing instruments into the home, singing during bath time and even dressing the child in a guitar onesie. While I'm not endorsing this or that infant wear, I can understand why parents who feel passionately about music might want to dress their child in guitar-wear even before they can express preferences of style. As someone who celebrates and learns from children's musical discoveries every day, I get it. Parents, keep singing. Rock on, sweet babies, reminding us of your inborn musical genius.

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