

The Myth Of The Simple Song With Infants And Toddlers

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Singing with children is something many parents take for granted. We know we should do it even if we don't have the greatest voice. We know it often works to calm an upset child. We know our kids enjoy it based on their giggles, coos, smiles, or simple eye contact. But why is it really good? When does the simple song become a learning opportunity?

I'm lucky enough to sing with very young children, 3 months to 2 years old, several times a week. I work in a center for infants and toddlers where music is a powerful tool for connecting with babies, building community, and simply having fun. Usually I end every class with a song called "By 'n Bye" (see Mike and Peggy Seeger on "American Folk Songs for Children"), a traditional folk song from Texas and this song has simple lyrics as follows:

By'n bye, by'n bye stars are shinin'

Number number one, number two, number three, number four

Good Lord, By'n bye, By'n bye

Good Lord, By'n bye.

The melody is soothing, and right away it communicates an ending, going to sleep, calmly moving along to the next activity in the classroom, it brings closure. I accompany it with hand movements that include a sprinkling of stars with my fingers moving slightly and slowly on both hands, and then counting one finger at a time for "number, number one." I'm sure to sing it twice so I can count the fingers on both hands.

But when you watch children between 6 months and 2 years old interact with this song it becomes so much more than just goodbye, and a reminder of what children can do and how they learn.

This song calls children to attention. They stand still, turn to look at me, and they know that something important is about to happen. We gather together mentally, even if we are only six months old. We get organized in time and in space, as we say goodbye.

The song prepares children emotionally to accept that music time is over and perhaps hand washing or lunch is ahead, or maybe outside time. The transition is announced and children have time to process change. They need that time and we respect them by providing it.

From three months, and as soon as a child can see, they focus on my hands which is fascinating. This knowledge is immediate. Glued to my movements, the youngest babies seem to be studying how that hand thing works, where is it going? They track it intensely.



Next, as they get a bit older, they start to wonder, can I do that too? I have those things and maybe mine move! Even the smallest baby will move their hands in response to what I'm doing. By the time a child is walking they'll be face to face with my hands.

Then magically, a 15-month-old will fold four fingers down and point one as I start singing "number, number one." They've figured it out. While they have no idea they are counting, or that what I'm singing is numbers, or that one utterance yields one finger, they feel the relationship of the rhythm I'm singing to the moves I'm making. Finger goes up on the strong downbeat.

Sometimes, children will use the pointer finger to connect with me, pressing their pointer into mine. No prompting, just an independent drive to be together through the song.

If we list all the things they've learned you would be astonished:

- Songs help us say goodbye
- I have a hand
- My hand has things at the end that move, fingers
- I can move my hand and fingers, together or one at a time
- Every time she says the word number I put up another finger
- The next finger goes up when I feel the rhythm indicate it is time
- They hear the music of counting, the order of the numbers
- They use their fingers to point and point their finger at mine
- They imitate
- We are all doing this thing together and it feels good.

This is just one song in one center with one group of children. Magnify that each time a teacher sings a song anywhere any time. With hands and without, with illustrated songbooks, with guitar or acapella, the learning is multi layered. Songs teach us about time and space, feelings, movement of the body in parts and whole, the sounds of different languages, how to be with friends, singers as a source of joy and comfort, and a plethora of human experiences. As the child grows, their capacity to feel music expands in complexity. There's no such thing as the simple song. Adults take for granted the intensely new and alluring experience of music as the child jumps in, heart and mind, eager to explore the music of the universe that surrounds them every day.

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