



SING  
*for*  
PLEASURE

# SfP Pointers

## #16: Working with Early Years (0-5 years)

Over the last few years, I have worked for both Opera North and my local Music Hub as an Early Years musician, delivering family music sessions and music sessions in schools and children's centres. I've trained as a Kodály Music Practitioner, so much of my advice follows this particular school of thought. This is certainly not a definitive guide to Early Years work, but I hope it provides a helpful starting point for those of you interested in working with younger children. Here are some of my top tips for planning and delivering sessions for the Early Years:

- ❑ **Sit in a circle and at the same level as the children you are working with (if possible!)**

This gives you clear sight lines to every child (and adult) but it also creates a sense of equality. The only time this should be reconsidered is if you have any participants with particular needs (e.g. people who are deaf/partially deaf) who will need to make certain they are sitting facing you for ease of communication.
- ❑ **Develop a structure to your sessions**

All of my sessions always begin with a Welcome song and end with a Goodbye song. In between, I tend to plan my sessions so that we start with spoken rhymes, followed by some stretches or movement. I then deliver the core material of my session and finish with some listening towards the end. This structure provides clear cues for children that a session is starting/ending and also provides a clear framework for adults (teachers or parents). Whether your sessions are regular or drop-in, this structured framework can make a new musical experience seem less daunting and encourage children's confidence week on week as they become familiar with the regular repertoire.
- ❑ **Hello and Goodbye songs are important**

As well as providing a very clear signal that a session is about to begin or to end, these songs help to make people feel welcome in a space. Singing both hello and goodbye individually to each child helps to make them feel special and included in a session (this is especially important for some children with SEN as they may only respond to named cues). Once children are familiar with these songs and confident singing individually, I encourage them to each sing Hello to me after their own name is sung. Learning names for each session can be a long process but ultimately is very worthwhile, and children enjoy laughing at your mistakes along the way!
- ❑ **Encourage children to experiment with different types of voices**

In order to help children find the difference between their singing and speaking voices, I use the following rhyme:

Musician: Have you brought your (speaking) voice? (in a speaking voice)  
Children: Yes I have, Yes I have (in a speaking voice)

You can experiment with performing in different voices - whispering, loud, squeaky, deep, robot, fast, slow and singing voices - and encourage the children to copy these voices back to you. This short call and response rhyme helps children to play imaginatively with their own voices and feel intuitively how to create those different voices. This can then be developed by encouraging children to think of their own voices or by then applying this work to other warm-ups and rhymes. This rhyme is popular with children from 18 months up to 5-6 year olds!
- ❑ **Helping children to match your pitch**

Most children struggle to tell the difference between their singing and speaking voice, which results in them trying to sing but ending up using a low, forced speaking voice. This is often because many children's songs are pitched far too low for children to access their singing voices. Therefore most songs should be sung at a starting pitch of G<sub>4</sub> and A<sub>4</sub> for children to perform in their singing voice (children's ranges are from approximately D<sub>4</sub> - B<sub>4</sub>).

Furthermore, at a young age most children will only be able to accurately sing songs with limited notes: *so*, *mi* and *la* (notes 5, 3 and 6 of the scale). There will be many children who can match the intervals between these three notes but cannot yet match the pitch you are singing at. Persist in singing at a higher pitch and many children will gradually learn to listen to this and match it.

#### ❑ Give a starting speed or pitch for each rhyme and song

Providing some sort of starting signal such as 'Off you go' before each song/rhyme signals clearly that the children are about to start performing. By also singing 'Off you go' at the starting pitch (and speed) you would like the children to perform at, you are ensuring that they sing within their range and can therefore perform in their singing voice. If you are performing a rhyme, still provide them with a spoken 'Off you go' to set the tempo. This is the Early Years equivalent of an upbeat and is therefore crucial to a good performance!

#### ❑ Improvisation is not just for older children...

- ❑ In spoken rhymes, encourage children to perform in different voices (e.g. deep/robot/fast) and experiment with this as individuals. "Jelly on a Plate" is a perfect rhyme for this type of exploration and after trying many different voices, my groups decided to perform the first verse of "Jelly on a Plate" in speaking voices, "Sausage in a Pan" in deep voices and "Ghostie in the House" in a spooky, squeaky voice.
- ❑ There are many short songs which provide the opportunity for children to change the words, which is a basic form of improvisation. This helps to cement the idea that we can improvise and make the music individual to us. The following song is a perfect start to this process:

##### **I, I, me oh my, how I like my (cherry) pie**

This song is sung to the notes *so* and *mi*. A pie is passed around the circle. Whoever is holding the pie at the end of the song, decides the next type of pie, e.g. apple pie, chocolate pie. (Depending on their experience, you can sing this song as a group or as solos).

#### ❑ Involve children in the creative process

Encourage children to decide how a song might be sung (e.g. dynamics, speed). You could start a conversation by asking the following questions: How does the song make them feel? How might they show that emotion in their faces/their actions? How could you show that emotion in the music? By starting these creative conversations at an early age, we are helping prepare children for work on musical interpretation when they are older.

#### ❑ Combine well-known repertoire with written children's songs

Each session should have a mix between familiar and unknown repertoire. If children and adults are already confident and familiar with certain songs, they tend to be more open to learning new songs. It is because of this familiarity that nursery rhymes and well-known children's songs (such as "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes") are important songs within the Early Years repertoire. However, nursery rhymes are also often quite wordy and are written across too large a vocal range for children to be able to sing accurately.

Written children's songs such as those in the NYCoS Early Years book, or Jolly Music, are excellent resources because they have been composed specifically with young children in mind and so therefore use appropriate musical language e.g. written for a limited vocal range and written using simple rhythms. It is invaluable to invest in some high quality Early Years songbooks.

#### ❑ Some ways to use nursery rhymes:

- ❑ Nursery rhymes can be used to teach new vocabulary and help children to understand about the sequence of a story - e.g. Incy Wincy couldn't fall down the spout before it had rained...
- ❑ You can also encourage the children to engage with the song by adding appropriate actions or using Makaton.
- ❑ In "Hickory Dickory Dock" you can encourage careful listening by choosing one child to tap the drum once when they hear the phrase 'The clock struck one'. This requires the child to listen, show some self-control and use their fine motor skills and is no mean feat!
- ❑ Even if a child doesn't join in with singing a nursery rhyme, they will still be learning by listening or joining in with the actions you have chosen.

❑ **Use good quality props in your sessions**

Scarves, puppets and good quality instruments captivate young children and help bring songs and rhymes to life. Scarves can be used for movement activities as well as for songs about hiding. Good quality percussion instruments should be small enough for little hands and can be used from an early age to teach important instrumental skills - starting, stopping, watching a leader, keeping the pulse. It is also important to

remember to clean all of these props regularly, so make certain that you buy props that can be easily cleaned!

❑ **Never be afraid of repetition**

Children enjoy repeating songs multiple times because it allows them to be familiar and confident singing them. You might feel bored of singing a song, but it is likely that the children are still gaining great benefit from it. Once songs are well known, you can start to add in different activities systematically: encourage children to perform songs and rhymes as solos, add a pulse action to the song or work with a partner to add a clapping pattern to the song. These steps take time and patience, but they help children to develop core musical skills.

❑ **Unconscious musical learning**

In the Early Years, we can help children to learn core musical concepts unconsciously. By teaching these concepts covertly, children are learning via imitation in the way that they also learn language. A basic understanding of pitch is often unconsciously taught in simple *so-mi* songs and especially in many stretching songs where the pitch of the song correlates to the stretches upwards or downwards. The beat can be taught by encouraging children to perform simple pulse actions (tapping knees, shoulders) before moving on to more advanced pulse actions (accurately tapping a drum, clapping with a partner) and then even more complex pulse actions (walking, passing an object). When these concepts are taught systematically and slowly, a child develops a kinaesthetic and aural understanding of these concepts before being introduced to them academically.

❑ **Encourage solos right from the start**

By encouraging children to perform solos, spoken or sung, from an early age we can dispel the notion that performing in front of others is intimidating, and we can develop a child's confidence. Feedback should be positive and emphasise the skills they have mastered, but don't be afraid to help a child attempt a solo again if they've struggled with an element of the song/rhyme.

❑ **Start making time for listening from an early age**

Listening is just as important a musical skill as performing and should be developed in the same way. Children often love listening to classical music, especially programmatic music such as *The Planets* or *Carnival of the Animals*, or music from ballets e.g. *The Nutcracker* or *The Firebird*. Sometimes listening functions as a calming down activity at the end of a session, and at other times it's used as the starting point for some movement activities. It's important to consider the length of the musical pieces in order to encourage the most focussed listening possible - start by listening to short musical pieces (I usually start with pieces that last for approx. 1 min 30 sec to 2 min) and gradually increase the time spent listening.

❑ **Networking and training with a focus on the Early Years**

Sharing ideas and resources with other Early Years practitioners is invaluable and the "Early Years Music" Facebook page is an excellent place to start for online discussion. There are very good training weekends and weeks run by the National Youth Choir of Scotland (NYCoS) and the British Kodály Academy, although these both focus on a Kodály approach to early years teaching. Lucinda Geoghegan and Len Tyler also both run excellent one or two day training courses.

Naturally, the transferable skills gained from conductor training with Sing for Pleasure (e.g. thinking about an upbeat, systematically teaching a song and engaging with your singers) are all essential for Early Years work too!

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