

## **Making a Joyful Noise**

*Music Together uses the power of song to build cognition, language and physical development in young children*

**By Kathryn Geurin**

My daughter is a dancer. She's been dancing since before she could walk, before she could *crawl*. I do not mean this in a virtuosa, prima ballerina sort of way. I mean this in a gangly, teetering 1-year-old sort of way. When music comes on—any music, Leonard Cohen, the Muppets, Stan Ridgeway, Yo Gabba Gabba, a ring tone, a jingle, a music box, our repertoire of passed-through-the- generations ditties—she jolts out of her tiny busyness and lurches into a bobbling, bouncing boogie.

For Christmas, our tiny dancer was gifted a drum full of percussion instruments, and her impromptu dances are evolving to include the enthusiastic shaking, clanking and banging of bells, maracas, and nubby caterpillar drumsticks against everything in the house—mom, dad and self included—in her rhythmic quest. Like, I'm sure, most any child, saturated in the newness of their senses and unfettered by the weight of self-consciousness, music moves her diminutive body, soothes her spirit and ignites her mind.

So, when we got a tip about Deb Kavanaugh's Heldeberg Music Together class, an Albany outlet for the international early-childhood music and movement program, it seemed right up our alley.

The little one delighted in our first class, in the songs, the movement, the camaraderie of other tykes, the—gasp!—bucket full of percussion instruments spilled across the floor. And I delighted right along with her, in her joy and excitement. But after sitting down with Kavanaugh and reading through a passel of studies about music development, it became clear there was even more to celebrate about Music Together than the fun of it all.

The mixed-age curriculum, first offered nearly 25 years ago, is built on a strong foundation of research, which Music Together continues to follow, conduct and respond to. Studies are now regularly conducted on the impact of Music Together on child development, and have shown a correlation between participation in preschool Music Together programs and significant gains in cognitive, language, and physical development.

Similar studies about music education in general, including studies in the late '90s that indicated a link between music training and spatial reasoning in young children, got parents and early-childhood educators fired up about music education. But Kavanaugh and the developers of Music Together prefer to advocate the value of music for its own sake.

According to reasearch by the National Association for Music Education, "Music is among the first and most important modes of communication experienced by infants. The youngest children lack the gift of speech, but they are deeply responsive to the emotional ethos created by music. . . . Songs communicate adult love and the experiences of joy and delight; they teach children that the world is a pleasurable and exciting place to be. Music is essential to the depth and strength of this early foundation for learning and for connecting to life itself."

But listening to music is only the start, and that's where Music Together comes in.

"Music really is supposed to be done," says Kavanaugh. "It's a participatory thing. In other cultures, especially indigenous cultures, where they haven't been, well, spoiled by society is the way I like to look at it, they sing all the time. It's just part of their culture and part of their everyday life. We're working on building that with families here."

One of the key tenets of the program is active parent participation, but Music Together is no lapsit, sing-song circle of bitsy spiders and twinkling stars. What it is, says Kavanaugh, “is a language immersion class,” in the language of music. “Like reading readiness. It’s music readiness.”

As free and fun as the classes feel, they have a clearly defined structure, and the music collections, while specifically tailored for kids, challenge their ears and minds with musical complexity. “In every class we have to have at least three songs that are in a non-major key, and we have to have at least three that are in a non-double meter,” says Kavanaugh. Each class also has at least three songs without words, repeated tonal and rhythm patterns and a movement arc, which flows from focused movement to large movement and settles back again.

As with language development, early childhood—from birth to 6 years—is the most significant period for musical development, and has been identified as the “music babble stage.” According to Lili Levinowitz, director of research for Music Together, these years are “critical for learning how to unscramble the aural images of music and develop mental representations for organizing the music of the culture,” a skill known as audiation. The cognitive ability to process tone and rhythm and the kinesthetic abilities of movement and vocalization are largely defined during early childhood.

And yet, Kavanaugh, who was raised in a musical family, was stunned to find that many parents didn’t know any children’s songs, or only knew one or two. As our culture moves away from active music participation and more toward passive music listening, sadly, the shift can be seen in our children. A 1998 study of American kindergartners showed that fewer than half were able to differentiate their singing voices from their speaking voices. Another study indicated that many kindergartners were unable to march in a regular rhythm or repeat simple motor patterns.

“Music has been used forever to commune with the spirits,” says Kavanaugh, “to bring people together, to celebrate, to communicate with each other. Indigenous people really know that, and they use it on a regular basis. I feel like we, in this country, have forgotten that. I’d like to see us get that back.” Her goal, she says, is “to have everybody out there doing music in their homes. Imagine what a wonderful world it would be if we were all singing. Walking down the street, working, playing . . .”

Through Music Together, she’s found a path to help families toward that goal. A longtime musician and teacher, Kavanaugh took the Music Together teacher training six years ago and has since led more families than she can count on their musical journey. She currently teaches 10 classes each semester, four in Delmar and six in Albany, and the program continues to blossom.

In fact, Kavanaugh believes so deeply in the program that it is her policy to make it accessible for everyone. “I have people who trade with me, people who do payment plans, people on partial scholarships,” she says. “I think it’s really important. I was a low-income, single mother for a long time. . . . There were so many times when there was an opportunity that I would have loved to have for my children, that really would have enriched their lives, and I wasn’t able to do it. I never turn anybody away.”

Like she hoped, Music Together is building a culture of music. Families are meeting in class and building friendships beyond. “When the families come together,” she says, “the kids pull everyone together and start singing. We’re creating these little communities within the larger communities that are being led, in some ways, by the children.”

And Kavanaugh is shaping musicians. “You’ll see infants, after they go through a semester, if they fuss or if they’re cooing,” she says, “you’ll notice that they’re doing it in the key that we just sang, and all of them, pretty quickly, get the rhythm down.”

Sure enough, on the way home from our second class, Amelia took up the plastic measuring cups she clatters to amuse herself on car rides and began clanking them together, but there was a change in the usual cacophony of babble and crash. She was tapping the cups in a regular beat. And, in her own curious, bumbly tune, she sang the whole way home.