
Early Childhood Music Abuse: Misdeeds and Neglect

By

Edwin E. Gordon, Ph.D.
Research Professor
University of South Carolina

Through casual observation of very young children, one may conclude that the most productive time for a child to learn is at the moment of birth. From then on, inclination to learn decreases at a positively accelerating rate. The first year-and-a-half year of life is most important, 18 to 36 months is less fruitful, and three to five years of age is least pertinent for learning over the first five-year span of life. Consider how much a young child learns through informal guidance before entering school to receive formal education. Never again will a person at any age be prepared to acquire that much knowledge in such a short period of time.

Parents, siblings, and peers are perhaps the best teachers a young child will ever have for obtaining an inchoate education; formal schooling of one type or another must carry on the child's didactic development toward fulfillment. Without receiving informal guidance before embarking on formal instruction, a child's formal instruction becomes limited and in some cases, formal achievement may be unfeasible.

With regard to language, most youngsters receive at least enough informal guidance in linguistic skills to benefit from formal instruction. Unfortunately, that is not the case with music. The majority of children who are ready to receive formal instruction in school music are bereft of appropriate musical readiness to learn. I will be specific by

using language as analogy. That is not to suggest, however, music is a language. The fact is that only the processes for learning music and language have much in common.

Language Acquisition

Language skills are developed by the sequential acquirement of five vocabularies. The first is listening. The more language a newborn hears spoken, even though what is heard is not necessarily understood, the better prepared the child is for developing the remaining four vocabularies and undertaking school work. The newborn usually listens to speech anywhere from nine to fifteen months before engaging the second vocabulary, speaking.

Speaking begins with the child using familiar words, those that the child has previously heard. The more words the child has in a listening vocabulary, the greater the chances of the child becoming a better speaker. It follows that the more speech a child hears and the greater the variety of words the child has heard, the larger the child's speaking vocabulary. That is exemplary, because research findings are clear: It is difference, not sameness that contributes most to all types of intellectual development, language notwithstanding.

As a child approaches age two to three, the thinking vocabulary takes on importance. Asking and answering questions are emblematic of this third vocabulary. These three vocabularies – listening, speaking, and thinking – begin to take shape before children are taught formally. That is not to say the vocabulary development is complete: The better the education children receive early in life, the better the possibility of vocabulary development as they increase in age. The fourth and fifth vocabularies, in

order, are reading and writing. They usually become the province of work undertaken in formal schooling.

The sequential development of the five vocabularies is essential. Each vocabulary serves as a readiness and a base for the subsequent vocabularies. Succinctly and most importantly, the listening vocabulary forms the foundation for the other four. If the vocabulary of listening is weak, the speaking, thinking, reading, and writing vocabularies can be expected to follow suit.

Music Vocabulary Acquisition

Neglect and misdeeds in informal guidance in early childhood music leave many children who enter school at five years of age bereft of a music listening vocabulary. They may have heard music in the media, but such music consists primarily of sameness: major and rarely minor tonalities, duple and rarely triple meters. It is axiomatic that exposing children to Dorian and Mixolydian tonalities and meters moving in fives and sevens is advantageous for the development of more advanced music vocabularies. Without a preparatory background, many children will not have the necessary readiness to gainfully participate in and learn from school music activities.

When considering their child's language development, parents would not consider having youngsters listen to only recorded conversation as they realize that one-on-one speaking to the child is a necessity for their child's linguistic growth. Personal verbal attention by significant others, accompanied by encouraging facial expressions and body movements, contribute immeasurably to the learning of language. The same is true of music. Children need to be sung to by a responsible adult to acquire a listening vocabulary. During the early stages of development, it is not necessary for children to

sing in order to acquire a music listening vocabulary just as it is not necessary for them to speak in order to acquire a language listening vocabulary.

Moreover, whereas singing is the basic instrument and should be developed before all others in order for audiation to play a crucial role in musical achievement, adults must model appropriate movement and breathing for children to attain musicality. Adults should model free flowing, continuous body movements in boundless space before keeping time. This type of movement is related to space, whereas dancing is associated with time. Taken to a logical finish, weight and flow in movement are natural forerunners of time. Though it may seem paradoxical, seeing constructive movement and musical breathing modeled by other persons are important for a child to acquire a music listening vocabulary.

A practical understanding of musical time is elusive without first becoming acquainted and comfortable with a feeling for space. As a consequence of being forced to engage in time-keeping exercises rather than freely exploring boundless space, many children are relegated to counting and mimicking time-keeping activities, using small muscle movement as they get older. Rigidity and parochialism in musical expression are natural outcomes of using small muscles before large ones.

The proper acquisition of a listening vocabulary is crucial in early childhood musical development. Before discussing the second vocabulary, which involves singing, rhythmic chanting, and free-flowing continuous movement with deep breathing, one must consider a controversial subject: whether songs children listen to should be sung with words. Initially, songs should not be sung with words.

Children hear words in contrast to music in most of their waking hours. Because they are more familiar with words than continuity in music and are naturally motivated to comprehend their environment quickly, they unsurprisingly direct their attention to words rather than the musical aspects of song. Words may be cute and can contribute to children easily remembering a song, but long-range disadvantages that accrue by their use may outweigh immediate advantages.

As explained, singing, chanting, and movement accompanied by deep breathing constitute the second music vocabulary of speaking. They are to music what speaking is to language. In early musical development, adults should model tonal patterns and rhythm patterns, the “words” of music, for children to sing with no focus on the words and poetry of the songs. After all, children speak words before sentences and phrases, let alone poems, and so too should children sing and chant patterns before attempting to imitate or memorize a song with or without words. Once children acquire contextual audiation skills, adding words to a familiar melody is, of course, satisfactory procedure.

Tonal patterns and rhythm patterns are the words of music. In preparatory audiation, children are guided by listening to and imitating patterns to reinforce their musical listening and speaking vocabularies. These vocabularies in turn provide a foundation for the third vocabulary.

In language, thinking is the third sequentially developed vocabulary. In music it is improvisation. Imitation is no longer of central concern. Again, difference receives emphasis, although sameness is not to be disregarded. Children begin simple melodic and rhythmic improvisation activities by performing tonal patterns and rhythm patterns. They are guided by responding to a teacher’s pattern then performing a different but related

pattern consistent with tonality or meter.¹ A sensitive teacher is aware of the important role of silence in improvisation, thus allowing ample time for students to audiate before they perform. In improvisation, using solfege is not a necessity, but it is an advantage when used with musically mature children who require proper labels to identify musical form and function.

Just as adults help children to learn to speak a language before expecting them to read and write using that language, it makes sense to assist children in learning to improvise before teaching them how to read and write music notation. With the achievement of improvisational dexterity, children are ready *to bring* meaning to music notation. Those who are bereft of comfort in improvisation are, in disparity, relegated to attempting *to take* meaning from music notation in terms of music theory. If children are able to improvise, one observes the desirable outcome of music notation singing to and moving for them. They actualize that music is in the head and notation is on paper.

Children are never too young to understand, with proper guidance, that nearly every musical activity, not just personal performance, involves improvisation. For example, no one hears a song the same way. No one reads a score the same way and consequently interpretations of notation vary. The most important elements of music cannot be put into notation. Whether performing with or without music notation, we are always apparently improvising. The musicianship of young children surges exponentially when they become cognizant of the power of improvisation and how it serves them beneficially in various musical settings.

¹ For example, the teacher's sung "do mi so" might be answered with "mi so do" by the child. With regard to rhythm, "du ta de ta du de" may be altered by the child to "du de du ta de ta."

Context and Content in Music Learning

When the word “context” is paired with another word, “content,” the importance of both becomes strikingly evident. Patterns are content, whereas tonality and meter establish context. To teach children to perform content without concurrently audiating context leaves much to be desired. Good intonation comes about by relating performed pitches to an underlying resting tone and good rhythm is established by relating durations in a rhythm pattern to underlying macrobeats and microbeats. For example, a short song or a few tonal patterns, emphasizing the dominant/tonic relationship, might be sung for children to set the tonal context before they are asked to sing other songs or other tonal patterns in the same tonality. To set a rhythmic context, a short song might be sung or a few rhythm patterns chanted that emphasize the macrobeat/microbeat relationship for children before they are asked to chant other rhythm patterns in the same meter.

Individual Musical Differences

There are additional concepts involved in understanding the nature of appropriate early childhood music guidance and instruction. One concept is frequently ignored, specifically the concept that without acknowledging children’s individual musical differences in terms of potential to learn music, quality of instruction can reach only a very low level. In a group of twelve children, typically eight will possess average music aptitude; two will have above average or high music aptitude; and two will have below average or low music aptitude. To teach as if all have average potential is to do an injustice to every child. Those children with above average and high capacity to learn music become bored, and those below average and low capacity to learn become

frustrated. When a teacher ignores the varying aptitudes of their students, average students are also prevented from reaching their potential.

Two additional important research findings, though somewhat complicating in nature, are worth considering when discussing early childhood music experiences. First, to emphasize the importance of recognizing children's individual musical differences, it should be known that the distance between the highest and lowest scoring of second grade children on a valid music aptitude test is greater than the difference between average results of second and fifth grade students. Second, music aptitude is multidimensional. That is, there is not one, but several music aptitudes. The two basic music aptitudes are tonal and rhythm, improvisation notwithstanding. Previous discussion of acknowledging children's individual musical differences and needs should be attended to separately for tonal and rhythm endeavors. Children who are high tonally are typically average or low rhythmically, and children who are high rhythmically are typically average or low tonally.

School Music Instruction

It is crucial that adults do not consider newborns and preschool children to be like young kindergarten children. The two groups require varying types of teaching and they learn differently. The former group thrives on informal guidance, whereas the latter group is dependent on more formal than informal instruction. Nonetheless, if children who enter kindergarten or first grade have not enjoyed preferred early childhood music experiences, teachers should sing to them before or at least concurrently with asking them to sing. Five to ten minutes of every period would be sufficient for children to begin to develop a listening vocabulary. Remember, however, children listen to spoken language for about a

year before they are expected to speak coherently. Ideally, children should listen that long to music in various tonalities and meters that constitute a multitude of tonal patterns and rhythm patterns before they are expected to audiate and perform in a musical manner. A few minutes a week cannot be equated with a year, but whatever listening a child is exposed to will prove advantageous.

There is no doubt that all effective teachers use motivation and psychology to advance students' understanding of the subject matter being taught. Regrettably, because so many kindergarten and elementary school students lack proper readiness to learn music, music teachers must rely too heavily on motivation and techniques to gain or maintain students' interest in music itself. Some teachers even feel compelled to justify music teaching by attempting to convince administrators and the public at large that students' participation in music raises overall academic achievement. Confusing relationship with causation in that manner only exacerbates a serious problem.

No more than cursory awareness of the paucity of school graduates' musical understanding should induce alertness to the living validity that school music is generally unproductive. Simply listening to media and boisterous electronic music attests to the contiguous malaise. Equally disturbing is so few students, including erstwhile members of performance groups, participate in making music after graduating from school. Practically none can improvise or audiate harmonic chord changes of the music they listen to or perform.

Music curriculums, or lack of such, are not all to blame. Home environmental conditions leave much to be desired. Regardless of the source of the dilemma, substantial early childhood music guidance and instruction along with early childhood music teacher

certification might be the best, if not only, solution to the problem. In the interim, it would be wise for all school music teachers and music professors, regardless of teaching assignment and specialization, to become involved with and promote preschool music education in whatever way possible.

Conclusion

Some readers may think what I have said is too much, if not too harsh. If that is the case, I apologize. I simply am reporting what I have learned over the years from experimental, empirical, and teacher-observational research. My desire is not to anger, but to effect change in music education. I have outlined some facts and hope I have offered resolutions and suggestions for improving guidance and teaching when attending to musical needs of newborn and young children.

Misdeeds and neglect by many early childhood music teachers has been the rule for years. That situation, whether because of ignorance or disinterest, need not continue. With effort, progress can be made. No longer must only attractive techniques and props be of central concern. Good conscience insists the focus must be on development of nascent musicianship so upon entering school, every child will have the necessary readiness to learn what music teachers intend to teach. Given that reality, all children will be capable of learning music to the extent their potential will allow.

Author Biography

Edwin E. Gordon is known throughout the world as a preeminent researcher, teacher, author, editor, and lecturer in the field of music education. Since 1997, he has been Distinguished Professor in Residence at the University of South Carolina, following his retirement as the Carl E. Seashore Professor of Research in Music Education at Temple University in Philadelphia.

In addition to advising Ph.D. candidates in music education, Dr. Gordon has devoted many years to teaching music to preschool children. Through extensive research, Professor Gordon has made major contributions to the study of music aptitudes, stages and types of audiation, music learning theory, and rhythm in movement and music, to name just a few areas.

Before devoting his life to the field of music education, he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in string bass performance from the Eastman School of Music and played string bass with the Gene Krupa band. He went on to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 1958.

Professor Gordon and his work have been portrayed nationally and internationally on the NBC Today Show, in the New York Times, in USA Today, and in a variety of European and Asian publications. Much of his scholarly work is published by GIA Publications, Chicago, IL. He lives with his wife Carol in Columbia, South Carolina.