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## **Perceptions of Current and Desired Involvement in Early Childhood Music Instruction**

By

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### **Abstract**

*In this study, the researcher examined the perceptions of parents about early childhood music instruction, focusing on parental involvement and how parents' perception of their children's musical development affects their involvement. The researcher conducted five interviews with parents who had participated in an early childhood program at a community music school and coded and analyzed interview transcripts for emergent themes. Parents described their current involvement as marked by modeling, exploring varying roles between parent and child, and interacting with a cohort of parents and children. Several of the parents interviewed indicated satisfaction with their roles within the class and did not desire increased involvement in the class; others expressed a desire for more information about children's musical development and the teaching method used. The perceptions that seemed to contribute to parents' involvement, both current and desired, were the enjoyment that comes from musical interaction, the recognition of multiple roles of music in children's lives, and the view of acquiring musical skill and knowledge as developmental.*

One April morning I paused in the middle of an early childhood music course I was leading to wonder what effect having parents help lead activities would have on their children's musical development, both inside and out of class. Asking the parents to create patterns for their children to echo during the My Mother, Your Mother chant, for instance: Would children respond differently to their parents' voices and patterns than to my own? I was interested in how this might also affect parent-child interactions in class and families' interaction in the home. To begin exploring these questions, I designed this study to find out more about how parents view their role in their children's early childhood music education.

Recent research on parents in early childhood music education examines parent behaviors, perceptions, involvement, and attitudes. In their study of free musical play of 3- and 4-year-olds, Berger and Cooper (2003) found that adult behaviors contributed to "play-extinguishing" and "play-enhancing" among children. Specifically, children's play was extinguished at times due to physical proximity of an adult and when words of correction or criticism from an adult were issued. Conversely, behaviors that enhanced children's play included adult comments showing their valuing of children's play with comments indicating acceptance of non-traditional interaction with the musical environment. The researchers suggested further research on adult behaviors that extinguish or enhance children's musical play.

Parents' perceptions and beliefs impact a child's musical experience at home, according to Custodero's (2006) study of the prevalence and use of singing by ten families with 3-year-old children. The researcher highlights the importance of early childhood educators understanding the musical environment of students' home settings. Parents' use

of music, both personally and with their children, also affects children's musical experiences, in turn influencing the educational context. Cardany's (2004) in-depth interviews with ten families regarding parent perceptions of preschool music education also indicated that parental perceptions about music education influence their children's involvement in music. According to Custodero, Britto, and Brooks-Gunn (2003), age of child, gender of parent, level of education, and level of emotional distress play a role in the musical interactions between parent and child. Their study using data drawn from The Commonwealth Fund Survey of more than 2000 families showed differences in parental engagement for the factors listed above; of particular interest is their finding that emotional distress led to reduced musical engagement with children.

Three studies support the claim that parent attitudes affect children's musical involvement and development. Ilari's (2005) study of mother-child musical interactions led her to conclude that musical interactions are influenced by many factors, including parental beliefs about music. She went on to state that there is a need to include parent training in early childhood music experiences. Wu's (2005) survey of perceptions and attitudes of Taiwanese parents also underscores the impact of parent attitudes and perceptions on children's early childhood musical experiences and learning. She found significant correlations between parents' attitudes toward music and music instruction, and their children's participation in music instruction. Mallett (2000) found a positive relationship between parent attitude and the musical environment created in the home; another influence on children's musical development.

Researchers agree that parental involvement is key in early childhood music education and call for increased involvement of parents (Berger & Cooper, 2003;

Cardany, 2004; Custodero, 2006; Gordon, 2003; Ilari, 2005; Mallett, 2000; Wu, 2005), but determining ways in which childhood music educators can more fully and fruitfully involve the parents of young students remains a difficult task. With the intent of facilitating musical development of children enrolled in early childhood music instruction, the purpose of this research was to examine the perceptions of parents about early childhood music instruction, focusing on parental involvement, both current and desired.

The specific research questions were:

1. How do parents describe their current involvement in their children's musical development?
2. How do parents describe their desired involvement in their children's musical development?
3. How do parents' perceptions of the following affect their current involvement in their children's musical development: (a) goals and outcomes of early childhood music education, (b) role of music in children's lives, and (c) musical development?
4. How do parents' perceptions of the following affect their desired involvement in their children's musical development: (a) goals and outcomes of early childhood music education, (b) role of music in children's lives, and (c) musical development?

By better understanding parents' perceptions of their involvement in early childhood music instruction, early childhood music teachers may be able to structure music classes to take parents' perceived benefits into account, offer information to correct parents'

misconceptions, and provide additional resources, support, or training for parents in areas of interest.

### **Method**

I interviewed five parents who had participated in an early childhood music program at a Midwestern community music school in the last two years; all of the participants were mothers of children enrolled in the early childhood classes I teach at the school. The study participants represented a range of ages, occupations, number of children, developmental strengths and challenges of children, length of involvement in the program, musical training, self-definition of musical ability, and participatory style in class. In addition to inquiring about the parents' involvement in their children's musical development, current and desired, the parents were asked to describe what they most enjoy about the classes, what they would like to see changed, their views of the purpose of early childhood music instruction, their views of the role of music in their child's life, and the benefits of musical involvement noticed by parents.

I chose to select participants who had all been in the sections I taught because that ensured they had had a common experience of the class, versus being part of a class with another instructor. All five participants were mothers; while there are a few fathers who come to my music classes with early childhood students, the majority are mothers. Amy<sup>1</sup> is a stay-at-home mom of three daughters and has been participating in the program for over two years. She is taking coursework for a Ph.D. in educational research and policy and has a musical background of playing viola and trumpet. Betsy, mother of a 2-year-old son, has participated in the program for one year. Now a stay-at-home mom, she

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<sup>1</sup> All participant names are pseudonyms.

previously worked in a special-needs preschool and studied piano, guitar, and flute in school. Claire, mother of two sons and a daughter, participated in the early childhood music program several years ago when her oldest son was a toddler and now is participating again with her middle child. Claire is a human resources consultant for Fortune-500 companies and played the trumpet growing up. Debra, a free-lance photographer and stay-at-home mom, completed her first 9-week session of an early childhood music course with her daughter during the research study; she plays the piano and did some piano teaching in high school. Emily, an associate professor, recently gave birth to her second child, a daughter; she attended classes with her son for one year. While she loves to listen to music and has a background in dance, she did not have extensive musical training or experiences as a child.

The interviews were conducted in homes (one in a participant's home and four in my home) with participants' children playing nearby, supervised by another caregiver. Interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 1 hour. Participants received a list of questions prior to the interview, and each participant was asked the same questions, in addition to individualized follow-up questions posed as suggested by the conversation. I recorded the interviews using an Edirol R-09HR digital audio recorder, transcribed the recordings with HyperTranscribe and coded them with HyperResearch software. I then used HyperResearch, Mind Manager, and Microsoft Word to analyze the data for emergent themes, reading through the data multiple times, looking for prevalent codes and areas of emphasis within and across participant transcripts, creating concept maps showing possible relationships of codes, and recording memos using the comment feature in Microsoft Word (following recommendations in Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

## Researcher Lens

The early childhood music classes in which participants in this study were enrolled were based on Gordon's Music Learning Theory (Gordon, 2003; Valerio, Reynolds, Bolton, Taggart, & Gordon, 1998). I received training in this approach to early childhood music instruction from Dr. Cynthia Crump Taggart at Michigan State University and I have taught similar classes for children, age birth to age 5, for five years. The *Music Play* approach to early childhood music instruction features immersing children in a playful musical environment that includes songs and chants performed by the teacher with and without words in a variety of tonalities and meters, as well as tonal and rhythm pattern guidance. The teacher seeks to create a learning environment in which children are free to experience the music at their own level, often using props such as scarves and beanbags as well as small rhythm instruments. Typical behaviors by children in class include sitting and listening, wandering around the room, using instruments or props in similar or dissimilar ways to the teacher, and responding to tonal and rhythm patterns with random or purposeful responses as described by Gordon (2003).

I approach this study from an *emic* perspective both in terms of being the teacher of the courses and as a parent of a 2-year-old. My relationships with the participants brought both advantages and limitations. All participants in the study were currently enrolled in my early childhood music classes and several had been enrolled in previous classes. My daughter (30 months, also a class member) and I had socialized with three out of five participants and their children prior to the study, having met them through the program the previous year; increased socialization resulted from the interview process. One participant had previously met with me and discussed early childhood music

instruction at length; she provided input on research design and interview questions. I sought to minimize possible researcher bias by asking parents to reflect on their experiences in the program, and not to evaluate my teaching, since this may have been awkward for them. I also provided opportunities for member checks by participants, both of interview transcripts and of the data analysis and interpretation.

As the parent of a young child, I am fascinated with young children's early childhood music experiences and I encounter, interpret, and understand these in a way different than before I became a parent. Having the chance to go on play dates with study participants gave me access to information and observations that provided context and direction as I designed this study. As a parent, I am more aware of the pressures of parenting a young child than I was before, both in terms of time and effort in parenting. In addition, popular media such as parenting books and magazines increase the pressure to provide the right and best opportunities for young children in all areas of development, including music. This awareness guided me in developing and interpreting some of the interview questions.

## **Results**

The parents I interviewed seemed satisfied overall with their involvement in their children's musical development. Each family had devised their own way to make music a part of their children's lives. All spoke of the musical dreams they have for their children; in one case, the parent hoped her child would attain musical literacy and proficiency that she desired but had not attained; in other cases, parents hoped their children would find a joy of music that the parent had also experienced. Parents described their current

involvement as marked by modeling without forcing, exploring varying roles between the parent and child, and interacting with a cohort of parents and children.

### **Current Involvement**

**Modeling without forcing.** The idea of serving as a model for one's children arose often when discussing the role of the parent in early childhood music instruction.

One mother said,

I think I just have to be a model. I think that's all you can do. I don't think you can set expectations for "you must do it this way" or "you have to do it this way because I do." All you can do is say, "This is how I do it. This is how Mommy looks like when she does it. Now you do it - and you do it your way." I always get a little nervous when I see parents taking their kid's arms and making them go a certain way because I feel like if they're not "there" right now, they don't have to be "there" right now. It could be a developmental thing, it could be a cognitive thing, it could be "I don't feel like doing it today" thing. All you can do is show them, and show other people's kids, "this is what I look like when I do this; this is what I sound like when I sing this." And see where they end up. That's really all you can expect of yourself." (Amy)

Other comments about serving as models indicated a willingness to try new things, not to be self-conscious, to find ways of doing the activities that work for one's child, and to provide emotional space for one's child to join in activities without forcing.

Encouraging without forcing was important to the parents, both in the classes and as they talked about their musical dreams for their children. The parents all expressed a desire to provide a "musical foundation" for their children; four out of five of the mothers

emphasized that, while they hoped music would be a part of their children's lives as their children grew, the parents would not force the children to choose a certain instrument or continue an instrument or musical activity against a child's will. One mother did insist that she expected her child to play a musical instrument as soon as possible; she regretted her own lack of musical training and performance ability and wanted her child to be musically literate.

**Exploring varying roles between parent and child.** For children who are used to viewing Mom as leader, organizer, and caretaker, seeing her in a different role is surprising but important in the early childhood music class. Participants described the personal importance of having their children see them in a different role: "I think one of the most important is seeing Mom in a way that they don't normally do it – [not just] Mom as the boss, Mom as clean up-clean up, Mom as caretaker. It's seeing Mom as a person, separate from all the daily tasks I have to do." (Amy) Another aspect of the shifting role of parent/child that participants noted was the opportunity for children to receive instruction from another adult. As Debra commented, "I think it's been good for her to be in an environment that's a safe environment where I'm there, but I'm not necessarily the leader."

The interactions that occur in the music class can also put parent and child in an equal role as co-learners and co-players. Betsy spoke at length about the importance of being "in the moment" with her child during music class, enjoying a different kind of interaction with him than interactions that occurred during other parts of their day together. She also described the equality with her son she experienced during class:

Yes, sometimes when we're in that class and we've got scarves on our head, and we're swaying back and forth - it all feels like we're very equal here. I think it takes a couple classes for the parents to let go of the parenting role and feel comfortable. We get to a point in the class where everyone does it and no one is looking at each other. And the kid doesn't think "My mom shouldn't be having a scarf on her head." They really love that and everyone's there doing it together. It creates this equal thing for a moment, where there's not really a parent and a child. Even though there is. It's wonderful for that reason. (Betsy)

**Interacting with a cohort of parents and children.** Participants highlighted the importance of their children feeling the class was a safe environment, one in which they recognized the other parents and children and viewed them as friends. As Betsy commented, "It's fun to be able to say 'We're going to go see our friends at [music class].'" I think he does consider everyone there his friends, even the parents. He really looks forward to that." Getting to know a cohort of parents and children is facilitated in part when families choose to enroll for more than one session.

Another benefit of attending class with friends is the chance for musical interaction outside of class. One mother spoke about this continuation of musical activities that occurred outside of class:

It gives us something in common that we can talk about, and our kids can do together. It's absolutely true that [a fellow participant] has had my kids [over to play], and they've gotten together on the floor and done a little mini-class, because all the kids knew what to do. They've all had the experience. That's terrific - it's

something they can all turn into real, active play in an informal way. The children enjoy it; they enjoy each other doing it. (Amy)

As a teacher, it is exciting to think about the extended learning that can take place when parents and children take activities from class back to their homes and interact not only within families, but with friends as well.

Parents' comments also indicated an awareness of the learning that occurs between children in class, as well as between teacher and child: "I think it's also a good thing for him to see other kids get involved in music and have those interactions with their parents." (Betsy) By observing other parent-child dyads, Betsy's son found new ways to interact with the music and with his mother. In addition to appreciating the opportunity for their children to learn from other children, many parents identified the social interaction before, during, and after class as an important aspect of the experience for their children.

### **Desired Involvement**

Analysis of comments surrounding desired involvement revealed a delicate balance of instruction meeting expectations for both the children and the parents. The parents did not indicate a desire to be more involved in the planning, teaching, or evaluation of classes. Several times I have tried asking parents to lead portions of an activity; while I did not inquire specifically about this in the interviews, none of the parents mentioned it as something they appreciated or would like to do more when I posed questions about their involvement in class. Modeling was raised repeatedly as the preferred form of parental involvement.

This desire to remain in the current role and not to assume increased leadership in the class could be due in part to the busy life of parents of young children. One mother spoke convincingly of this:

Researcher: Do you feel you have any control or say in the music classes?

Claire: I think so. Although I sort of leave it up to the [school] to provide that guidance. There's so many things in my life that I feel like I project manage - life at home, laundry, my work. And I know this wasn't your question, but is it something I want to have more control over? Probably not, as long as we're seeing the outcome. I'm sure, at some point, if I were to give you suggestions, you'd be open to it. Do I have control over what [my daughter] is doing in class? I think so. I feel like I'm part of the process - definitely. It's not like she's going and sitting up front and I don't have control over anything.

Other comments indicated trust the parents placed in me as the teacher and in the school to direct the class. This view was expressed both by parents with a more musical background and by those with less musical training. As Emily said, "I feel very comfortable telling you or any teacher if I had an idea or if I felt something would be better. But I have so little expertise in any of this; I cede all control. But I do feel like I'd be listened to."

While participants indicated an overall satisfaction with their role in early childhood music instruction, several did request more information about children's musical development and the teaching method used in the class. The interest in knowing more about these things could be due in part to several participants' background in

education. Betsy spoke enthusiastically about her desire to know more about the musical developmental process:

I always like to hear ... "This is what's going on in your child's brain when we're doing this" or "These are the things we're looking for" . . . Any information about the theory behind how you've chosen to do something - I'm always interested to hear how that goes.

Debra was also interested in knowing more about the method used in class:

I would like to learn more about why this method is helpful, or why this is a good way - the background behind the method. And how it projects into the future - how does this help children who have done this, what advantages do they have?

Debra commented later that this information would help her know how to model in class.

### **Contributing Perceptions**

In seeking to understand parents' perceptions of early childhood music development and instruction, I asked them to articulate their ideas about the goals of early childhood music instruction and the outcomes they expected or observed as parents. Regarding goals, participants cited the following: lay a musical foundation; communicate availability of music to everyone; learn basics of melody and rhythm; learn to accept instruction from someone other than parents; learn to create a musical learning environment in the home; nurture self-confidence in children; instill excitement about music; and respond to musical patterns through imitation and improvisation. When asked about the outcomes of participation in the program, participants described observing their children echoing tonal and rhythmic patterns, singing songs, creating drumming parts, engaging in musical play with peers, moving to music, and exhibiting greater comfort with

socialization and, at times, enhanced communication. However, enjoyment was the outcome mentioned most often by parents, and this is the first of three key perceptions I identified as being linked to parents' choices about current and desired involvement in music instruction.

**Enjoyment from musical involvement.** The importance of enjoyment arose in response to multiple interview questions, including the goals and outcomes of early childhood music, parents' experience of the class, parents' own musical background and training, reasons for initial and continuing enrollment in the program, and family interactions occurring outside of music class. Within the class meeting times, parents noted their children's enjoyment of musical activities, enjoyment of interacting with their own parents, the parents' enjoyment of interacting with their child or children, or parents' delight at seeing and hearing musical progress of their own child/children as well as other children. Enjoyment carried over to outside settings, as described by participants, including the car, home, and community. Parents also commented that they thought their children were enjoying singing, dancing, playing instruments, trying new things, interacting with other children, and making musical material their own, both inside and out of class. Betsy's comment is one of many comments by all of the participants representing the centrality of enjoyment to the experience:

Part of the joy that comes from music is it's satisfying for him to hear something and be able to sing it later or add some drums to this little pause. I think it's fun for him to listen to something and try to mimic it later - that's something he's able to learn very naturally in the class.

**Multiple roles of music in children's lives.** The parents I interviewed discussed many ways they saw their children using music currently in their lives as well as ways in which they hoped their children would engage in music in the future. This understanding of the importance of music in a young child's life seemed to be one of the most important perceptions that led parents to participate in the early childhood music classes. Music was used functionally, in daily tasks such as bathing, cleaning, and bedtime routines. Parents shared anecdotes of how their children initiated the use of music in these situations, as well as parent-initiated interactions. One mother described how her daughter used music to amuse herself when she awoke from a nap. Several families reported using music, either listening to recorded music or singing known songs, to calm children when tired or anxious.

Participants also described their children's use of music as a means of communicating needs, emotions, and identity. Using music as communication arose most poignantly in a discussion of the role of music for Angie, a 3-year-old child who has participated in music classes since she was 3 months old. Angie was recently diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), which is categorized by the DSM-IV as an autistic spectrum disorder.

When all else fails, if Angie is struggling to find language, she can always sing.

Sometimes that's all she's got. If she's having trouble word-finding, and she can't make herself known, she can always sing something and I'll know what she needs.

Ultimately, that needs to fade away. Ultimately, she needs to move beyond that.

But if that's where she is right now and that's working for her, I'll take it. (Amy)

Participants made somewhat dismissive comments about the belief that “music makes you smarter,” seeming to accept what is portrayed in the media matter-of-factly, but placing more value on the other aspects of music in their children’s lives discussed above. Parents recognized the possible collateral benefits of participating in early childhood music courses but did not indicate those possible benefits as the reason for participation in the program. As Claire explained,

I know there’s a lot of study around kids who are involved more musically having higher test scores and all that. In high school, the cohort of people I was in music with were very bright people. We’ll see with my kids. But that’s not really a major reason why I’m doing it. I know it does help the brain develop physiologically. But I just want them to do it because I loved it so much.

**Musical skill/knowledge as developmental.** Several participants described the gradual growth that they observed in their children, tonally and rhythmically, during their participation in the program. None of the parents spoke about music as a “you have it or you don’t” construct; their comments indicated that they believed their children were musical and could continue to learn and do more musically. These parents also indicated an acceptance of their children’s current musical skills and abilities, noting that children progress through stages and skills at different speeds.

This perception of musical growth as developmental seems to be another key motivating belief. Rather than assuming their children are successful in learning music based on “talent” and that there is nothing that can be done to help a child who is not easily succeeding, all of the parents’ comments revealed a belief that music is something their children can learn and do.

## **Discussion**

Recognizing the parental perceptions of early childhood music instruction leads to several transferable implications for this setting. Enjoyment, so central to the families' experience in the early childhood music class, is important to continue to foster within the classes. This can occur through modeling enjoyment and joy in music making as an instructor; watching for evidence of student and caregiver joy within the class and developing activities or repertoire which elicit this joy; and inviting parents to share examples of joyful music making they observe in their children outside of music class.

The five participants of this study represent a range of parental modeling styles in class and family engagement with music outside of class. Recognizing and honoring this diversity calls for teachers to provide multiple ways of modeling and participating in class, accommodating parents' comfort levels and personal expression styles. It also suggests the importance of designing instruction to include a variety of activities that could be carried into the homes, some that require more musical materials and skills, and some that are accessible to parents with less musical training. In this way, the early childhood music teacher can individualize instruction for parents as well as for children.

Providing additional information on children's musical development and the teaching method used in class could be important to parents participating in a range of early childhood music programs, from university-based lab settings to community music schools to commercial early childhood music programs. This can be accomplished through written literature, web-based communication, parent orientation sessions, and informal dialogue before or after classes. Parents may be able to use this information not only in participating in classes more fully, but also in following their children's musical

growth, sharing new milestones with the teacher, and understanding ways to support a range of musical behaviors in the home as well as educational settings.

A final interpretation of the data from this study suggests that teachers be proactive in working with parents as partners in early childhood music education. Parents have varying musical backgrounds, experiences, and skills, but are universally experts in knowing, understanding, and working with their children. By enlisting parents' help in observing their child's musical behaviors in class and at home, sharing children's musical interests with the teacher (such as Amy telling me that her daughter loves to dance to salsa music), and by educating parents about musical development and teaching methodology, early childhood music teachers may be able to extend music learning as well as create an inclusive, supportive music learning environment in the early childhood music classroom.

Continuing research is needed on the role of parents in early childhood music instruction, including describing their perceptions and investigating how these perceptions affect the teaching-learning process. Future studies could focus on interviews with other populations, including parents with musical background who choose not to enroll in early childhood music programs; parents who do not have strong music backgrounds or self-identify as *unmusical*; parents of children who have developmental delays or disabilities or are considered at-risk due to social, emotional, or economic factors; and parents of children for whom English is a second language. A longitudinal case study could yield insights into the impact of parental perceptions, beliefs, and experiences on music education and development of children. Finally, developing and piloting training sessions or approaches to education for parents based on the information requested in interviews

could assist music educators in more fully involving parents in their children's early musical development.

Betsy's final comment in her interview struck me as especially expressive, containing many of the themes that emerged from the entire study:

Researcher: Is there anything else you want to tell me about early childhood music?

Betsy: We really love it. When I was thinking about this interview, I think it's really good for a little 2-year-old to have that time to just [play with music]...[music class is] exactly what a kid wants, for everyone to be bobbing their heads around, doing shakers, it's just great. The thing about the class is it's a designated time that I'm not going to answer the phone, or say "get your shoes, we gotta get in the car." It totally takes out the extra things and allows us to be together. Maybe that's a little bit selfish, it's a parent-child relationship thing – that opportunity for connection. Essentially, I can feel how it creates a special feeling in our home and our family. For [my son], watching him grow in his love for music and really watching for music. He is able to take the lead in seeking out musical opportunities – it's not just me as a parent saying "It would be good for you to do music, so let's do this." He is motivated to take that, which I think is really natural for a 2-year-old. When I see his response to it, and his friends, there's a draw to music. It's exciting to see that fostered.

As a teacher, I am grateful and humbled to learn from parents such as Amy, Betsy, Claire, Debra, and Emily about their perceptions of early childhood music instruction. Seeking to more fully understand parental perceptions and involving parents in the early childhood

music instruction has led to positive benefits as reported by the participants and for their children, as well as for me as a teacher.

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## Author Biography

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