

Singing through the Day

Children start hearing and responding to sounds before they are born. In fact, even in the first few days of life, they recognize their own mother's voice. After all, they've been listening to her talk for months.

Connections have already been made in their brain that will help them understand and speak, but in the next few years, they need lots more opportunities to hear and practice language. Songs give children those opportunities in a way that's fun for everyone.

"Baby talk"

Adults all over the world seem to have a special way of talking to babies. When they are little, we make our voice higher, use simple words and sentences, speak more slowly, pause between sentences, and repeat the same phrases over and over, often in a sing song tone of voice.

This kind of "baby talk" gets infants' attention because it fits with their ability to hear higher pitched sounds better than lower pitched sounds. Babies understand more easily what people are talking about when adults use simple words and repeat them often. Simple words, repetition, lilting tone... that could be a description of many children's songs. Indeed, songs have a special place in communication with babies, from playtime to bedtime, and they continue to be important as children grow.

Get active

Songs that include gestures and movement allow children to join in, even before they can say the words. Take the song "Head and shoulders, knees and toes". At first, you will move your baby's hands to point to the different parts of his or her body. Later, your little one will participate by imitating your hand and body movements. Then gradually, he or she will be able to add more and more words until finally you're singing along together.

Rhythm, rhyme and repetition

Music and songs develop listening skills, an essential part of communication. In songs, rhythm and rhyme make the important words stand out so that they are easier to hear. Also, because many songs have a chorus that is repeated several times, children get a chance to practise and therefore remember words and whole sentences.

Emphasize the rhythm

Rhythm is what first attracts young children to music and songs. Maybe it reminds them of the beat of their mother's heart, probably one of the first sounds they heard. You can emphasize the rhythm by bouncing a baby on your knee or by clapping and swaying with older children. If you feel like it, why not dance together!

Make songs easy to learn

You can make it easier for children to learn a new song by singing it very slowly at first. It may be a lively song, but wait till they know it better before speeding up the pace. Once children become familiar with a song, you can pause to let them fill in the next word. Often, the rhyme will help them remember the last word in a line, for instance.

Learning songs from tapes

If you don't know any children's songs and need some help getting started, you can borrow tapes from the library. But don't just listen to the songs. Take a bit of time and learn to sing them with the children. Even if your voice isn't perfect, no tape can adapt the songs to the age and interests of your particular children the way you can.

Making up new songs

One way to get children's attention is by using their names in a song. You can also make up new words for familiar songs to accompany your routines and activities. For example, when it's time to leave a friend's house, try singing "Time to leave, say good-bye" to the tune of "Frère Jacques". Some children find moving from one activity to another very stressful. A made-up song like this can help by changing the mood and by giving the signal for what will happen next.

A song sometimes gets better results than an order. Try announcing mealtime with "If you're hungry and you know it, come and eat", sung to the tune of "If you're happy and you know it".

Songs for all occasions

There are songs for all occasions: for describing familiar activities, for making routines go more smoothly, for changing a bad mood and for relaxing before nap time. Sharing music can build bonds and add good times to everyone's day.

by Betsy Mann