

## The Musical World of the Three- and Four-Year-Old

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The world of the three- and four-year-old is a unique one. It can be a bit challenging to teach a group of children this age for a number of reasons:

- They do not yet have the reasoning capabilities of the older four-and-a-half or five-year-old.
- They are *very verbal* and because they do not have a true sense of inner speech they say every thought that pops into their heads.
- They have just discovered their imaginations, which can sometimes take the class to places other than what the teacher originally had in mind when carefully planning your lesson.

But these are some of the very same qualities that make them delightful students, if the teacher is willing to teach them in a way that capitalizes on who they are and how best they learn.

Three- and four-year-olds are at a critical time in their music development. As you know, the toddler's world is primarily focused on his physical development. As he has only recently become mobile, he spends a great deal of time practicing and challenging his newly acquired skills. Always striving to do more, he is in constant motion, trying out a variety of locomotor activities, such as running, jumping, spinning, and galloping.

Conversely, the world of the three- and young four-year-old focuses on language development. Going beyond the rudimentary verbal skills of the toddler, the three-year-old has recently discovered the power of language – the ability to persuade an entire room full of people to embrace an idea by simply putting his thoughts into words.

This is a wonderful development to witness and it presents many wonderful teaching opportunities (more on that, later), but it also presents a few musical challenges. Many toddlers have a very clear sense of steady beat, but they often seem to lose it when they reach the age of three. This is probably due to their preoccupation with language. They are more inclined to focus on the rhythm of the melody or the rhythm of the text of a song, rather than on the steady beat. Since rhythm can only be understood when it is heard in the context of a steady beat, it is critical to the rhythmic development of the child to be engaged in steady beat activities, particularly at this time.

The child's preoccupation with language also impacts his vocal development. A child's singing voice is generally higher pitched and a lighter quality than his speaking voice. However, since most three- and four-year-olds are quite talkative, their speaking voice gets a real work-out and their singing voice often gets "lost". The singing voice can be rediscovered if the child is surrounded by

good singing models who sing in the appropriate range, and if he is encouraged to engage in vocal activities that nurture the singing voice. This interruption of the child's vocal development can be frustrating for the child and parent, and it is often perceived and wrongly labeled as an inability to sing. Unfortunately, that perception is very difficult to change once it is embedded in the child's mind.

As mentioned earlier, the young child's fascination with language presents many wonderful teaching opportunities, and many of them can be facilitated through the use of effective storytelling. "Children, I have a story to tell you," is a magical phrase. It seems to calm the most active child, and at the same time it wakes up the sleepy-heads.

A good storyteller paints pictures by using beautiful language, expression, and inflection. When the storyteller tells the story in this way, without using props or other visual aids, she is nurturing the child's ability to see, in his mind, the images being described by the storyteller. When the story is structured in such a way that the children are involved, either through movement or by suggesting what happens next, the children are "becoming" the characters in the story – moving, thinking, and feeling the way the characters might. When used this way, stories nurture the child's imagination, develop the children's listening skills, and offer many opportunities for movement exploration and vocal play.

Teaching through stories allows the teacher to join the child in his fascination with language and engages the child in exactly what he needs: movement activities to nurture his rhythm development, vocal activities to help define his singing voice, and listening activities to develop his attention span and his ability to focus. Finally, stories are an irresistible invitation for the child to imagine, and a well-developed imagination is crucial if we expect the child to grow up to be an empathetic adult—one who is able to identify with other people's joys and difficulties, and an abstract thinker—one who can *think* through a situation without the help of concrete materials.

In addition, a well-developed imagination can help sustain the child in situations that might otherwise result in boredom or even apathy. Other benefits of a well-developed imagination include...well – one can only imagine!

For more information about music classes for children, contact Jill Hannagan of The Hockessin Music School at 302-239-8281.