



Communicative musical play with young children

A Froebel Trust early childhood
research highlight by Dr Jessica Pitt



Froebelian principles

This research highlight looks at sound and music play as potential for expression, creativity, critical thinking and autonomy. It makes links between research and practice in Froebelian education today.

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) was the inventor of the kindergarten and a pioneer of early childhood education and care. Froebel's work and writing changed the way we think about and value early childhood. **The principles** of his work continue to challenge and be relevant to modern early childhood education.

Find out more about a Froebelian approach to early childhood education at froebel.org.uk

A Froebelian approach to education reflects the wholeness of Froebel's ideas and brings together all the principles of his work. This research highlight makes particular connection to four of the principles:

- Unity and connectedness
- **Autonomous learners**
- **The value of childhood in its own right**
- Relationships matter
- **Creativity and the power of symbols**
- **The central importance of play**
- Engaging with nature
- Knowledgeable and nurturing educators

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What is communicative musical play?

It is a sound-based play environment for communication that transcends the use of words and language, enabling all children's competence and creativity to be heard and valued.

Musicality is an innate and important part of early bonding and interaction. ¹

Music is increasingly seen as an important aspect of young children's learning across the curriculum. ²



“Music itself is peculiarly suited to contribute to education as understood by Pestalozzi and Froebel. Most human activity and experience require language as the medium for their understanding and expression. Music transcends language, in that it is a distinct medium of human experience independent of language...” ³

Contemporary research



Shows us the innate musicality of humans and its importance in communication and interaction ⁴

Froebel believed in the importance of music and song as the first learning-teaching medium. His songs and rhymes are designed to encourage motor skills, stimulation of the senses, self-activity and attachment ⁵

Froebel's emphasis



Why is music important?

Froebel understood that parents and carers, as the child's first educator, communicate through music what it is to be human in the world.

Pitch, pulse and rhythm (the foundational elements of music) are natural expressions of humanity found across all cultures.

The benefits of music include:

- The development of language skills;
- The flexibility in its meaning;
- It can synchronise rhythmically co-ordinated play experience;
- It is built on anticipation - tension and release - which leads to pleasure and shared good feelings;
- It fosters a sense of belonging through **shared experience in time.**⁷

Music can be thought about as participation - something we all do. This **musicning**⁸ is a communicative activity through which everyone connects and participates.

It is not dependent on performing works, technical skills & knowledge nor mastery of an instrument.

“Quite young children in quiet moments croon little songs to themselves [...] more heed should be given to it [...] Then song would develop as spontaneously as speech, in which a child of his own accord will invent new words to express new-found ideas.”⁶



Why do we need to include musical play?

- **Musical play is an intrinsic part of children's play activity:**

Look at children playing. **They are using objects, their voices and their bodies in musical, rhythmical ways as part of their play;** ¹⁰

- **Musical play allows children to communicate with others beyond words:**

Communication of feelings and creative ideas may be better expressed non-verbally. These non-word forms of communication are equally valid and may be embodied;

- **Musical play is process-oriented:**

Musical play is a freely chosen activity with no particular outcome in mind. By contrast, learning to perform a song or piece of music is product-oriented;

- **Musical play contributes to a sense of identity:**

Children spontaneously combine different modes ¹¹ for example, movement (spatial) with vocalisation (auditory). These improvisatory and trans-modal events **help with the formation of musical identity and develop musicality.** ¹²



“When a child thinks, feels and acts in terms of music, he is achieving something he cannot achieve in any other way.” ⁹

Froebel suggests nurturing the inner feeling of the learner as the starting point for music making not mechanical learning of songs and rhymes.

“Start from the pupil's own life and proceed from it like a bud or a sprout.” ¹³

How can settings implement communicative musical play?

Planning and Documenting

- Plan for play opportunities that do not rely on using words for effective communication;
- Offer **sound-rich play environments** comprising varied open-ended materials. This rich variety of contrasting variables **will encourage children's creativity and inventiveness**; ¹⁴
- Document and **reflect on what and how children are communicating**. Filming and **watching back in slow motion** ¹⁵ **allows time to notice** non-verbal communication more clearly;
- **Reduce adult talk, slow down, and use OWL - Observe, Wait, Listen** ¹⁶ and **Intensive Interaction**; ^{17a, 17b}
- Assess the setting's music provision using this **Self-Evaluation Tool** (Tri-borough Music Hub, 2018). ¹⁸



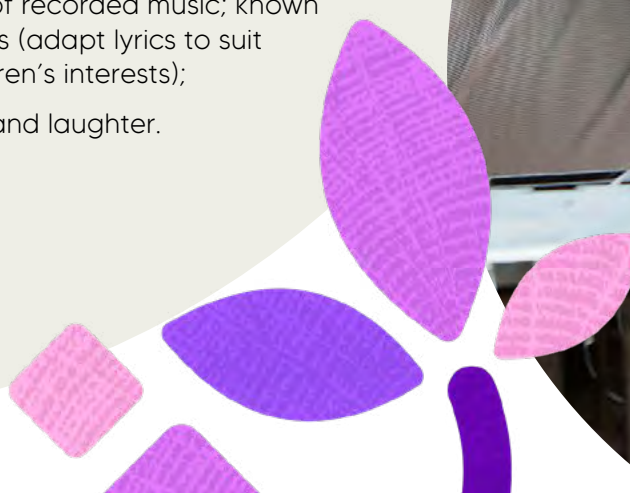
Pedagogy and Practice

Practice is unhurried and sensitive following ideas of:

- **Emergent listening**¹⁹ being open to the unexpected;
- **Slow pedagogy**²⁰ with an attitude of learning and being with the children.

Adult-guided music activities might include:

- Tension and release songs e.g. **Ooooh ping; Peekaboo;**
- Vocal play e.g.. **Dinosaurs; Rocket ship;**
- As part of slowing down and celebrating key moments use: greeting songs, tidy-time music; use of recorded music; known songs (adapt lyrics to suit children's interests);
- Fun and laughter.



How can musical play help communication?

Musical Play focuses on the lower three levels of the pyramid.

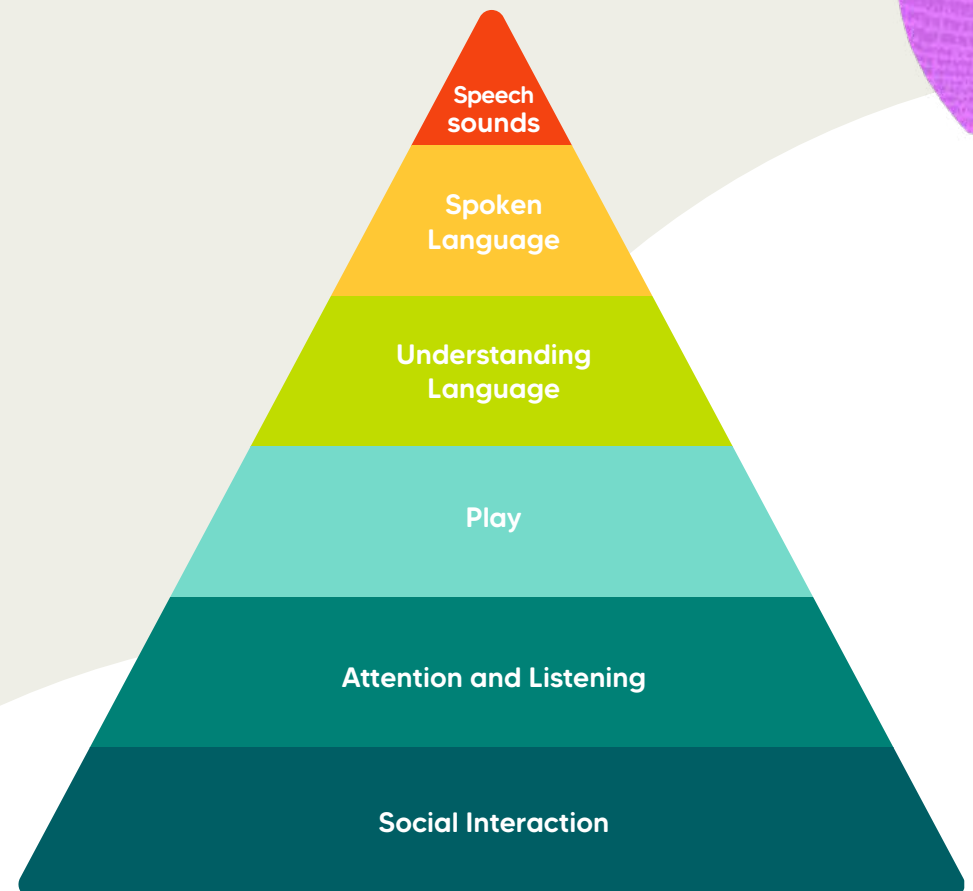
Gaining confidence and experience with these levels **helps to access the higher levels of the pyramid.** ²¹

In a communicative musical play space focus on:

- **OWL: Observe, Wait, Listen;** ²²
- **Intensive Interaction:** ^{23a, 23b} copy and celebrate offers to interact.

Look for multiple modes of communication and creative expression including:

- eye contact,
- watching with interest,
- gesture,
- vocalisation,
- rhythmic use of objects/sound makers,
- rhythmic movement,
- symbolic actions to known songs,
- singing,
- laughter
- words ²⁴



Communication Pyramid (used by many speech and language therapists)



Reflecting on Communicative Musical Play

Have your ideas about using music in your setting been changed or modified as a result of reading this?

In what ways has reading this informed your thinking about young children's communication?

What insights from this highlight could you use in developing music practice in your setting?



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Other online resources

Louisa Penfold: Loose parts and children's play: <http://www.louisapenfold.com/loose-parts-children-play/>.

Magic Acorns: SALTMusic: <https://www.magicacorns.co.uk/saltmusic>

Matt Laurie: Rapport-based musical communication: <https://www.mattlaurie.com/musical-interaction-training>

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Acknowledgements

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