

When Should Children Learn How to Play an Instrument?

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A common question that I get asked as a music educator is “What age should a child begin to study a musical instrument”? Anywhere between the ages of four and six is a good time for a child to begin formal music lessons (Baldwin, 2008). It is important to keep in mind that some music teachers have their own preferences on when children should start formal music lessons based on their training. For example, some music teachers prefer that children begin to study a musical instrument at age six after they already have some knowledge of basic reading skills (Gill, 2008). Also, some piano teachers prefer that children start piano lessons at age five when their hands are a little bigger and their attention span allows them to sit still for longer periods of time (Geller, 2007). When you are looking for a music teacher for your child, it is important to inquire about their music and teaching background. It is also important to ask a prospective teacher what ages they prefer to teach and why (Chroninger, 1994). The piano is a good starter instrument for children due to the broad range of notes and versatility of the instrument. Musical knowledge acquired at the piano can easily transfer to another instrument (Baldwin, 2008).

If your child’s interest is a woodwind instrument, the recorder and flute are excellent starter instruments. Children can start recorder lessons as early as age five. The recorder is a perfect starter instrument for young children because it requires less breath control, it is lightweight, and the fingering is reasonably logical. If your child is

interested in learning to play the flute, it is recommended that they start lessons on this instrument at age six or seven. The Suzuki music method is a good program to look into if your child is interested in learning how to play the flute, violin, guitar, or piano at a young age. Be advised that the Suzuki method of teaching requires one parent to take lessons and learn along side their child. Instruction on other woodwind instruments such as the clarinet, oboe, bassoon, trumpet and other brass instruments are recommended for children at the age of nine. These instruments are larger in size and heavier in weight for children under the age of nine. A younger child is better off starting on the recorder or flute and waiting until the age of nine to learn another woodwind instrument. Like the piano, they can transfer their acquired music theory knowledge to another woodwind instrument (Schmidt-Jones, 2007).

If your child is interested in learning how to play a percussion instrument they can start lessons on the snare drum between the age of five and eight. It is suggested that children start on the snare drum because it is a simple percussion instrument and children can practice on drum pads. The snare drum can also be a very positive experience for children socially because they can graduate to performing in school marching bands or community orchestras where they can form friendships with other children their age (Gill 2007).

If your child is interested in pursuing a string instrument they can start lessons between the ages of six and eight. The Suzuki method also starts children on the violin at the age of three so you can check with your local Suzuki studio for more information.

It is not necessary to wait until your child is old enough to begin formal music lessons to introduce your child to music. Just like reading to your child it is important to start singing with your child on a regular basis. Listening to a variety of music playing rhythm instruments and dancing to music is also helpful in encouraging music appreciation at a young age. A Child can begin to develop their language and music skills before they are born. The ear develops a few weeks after conception (Campbell 2000). Four months after conception, the ear is able to make connections to the brain which enables the fetus to hear sounds and language while they are in the womb. At five month the auditory system of the fetus is mature enough to process sound (Campbell, 2000). Therefore it is important to speak to the baby while they are in utero so they can begin to audiate and become familiar with spoken language. Speaking and singing to an unborn child helps the child to become familiar with their parents voice which helps to strengthen the bond between the unborn child and their parents. Other family members and friends ought to be encouraged to do the same before the baby is born (Campbell 2000).

After the baby is born parents and caregivers should continue to speak and sing to the child in a normal voice and imitate their babbling. Parents and caregivers can sing simple nursery rhymes and children's songs to young children between the ages of 0 -2 to help children develop their vocabulary and language skills. Bath time is an excellent time to sing to your infant. You can also sing to your infant as you change their clothes (Honig, 2000). Lullaby songs such as *Brahms Lullaby* and various recordings of lullaby songs from around the world provide another opportunity to introduce music to your

child (Honig, 2000). Singing to children from the ages of 0-2 will help to develop the music readiness skills that they will need to acquire before learning how to play a musical instrument. Singing Nursery Rhyme songs to children help children to begin to construct the structure of language such as grammar and syntax (Campbell, 2000)

Young children also benefit from dancing to a variety of different genres of music. These early experiences give children the opportunity to develop basic timing, coordination, creativity and problem solving skills (Campbell, 2000). Toddlers also have an interest in learning songs that focus on different parts of the body. Example of these types of songs include: *One, Little, Two Little, Three Little Fingers*, *“Head Shoulder’s Knees and Toes*, and *This Little Piggy Went to Market*. Older pre-school enjoy songs with more action such as *Here We Go Looby- Loo* (Campbell, 2000). Toddlers also enjoy hearing and singing songs that you can substitute their own name into the song such as *Mary Wore Her Red Dress* (Honig, 2000). Singing to your child during transition times: cleaning up toys and getting ready for lunch help to prepare your child for a transition (Honig, 2000). Singing songs in the call and response style, or echo method help children to develop their oral language, vocabulary, and listening skills. Examples of quality and professional children’s music that utilize the call and response method include: Frank Leto, Ella Jenkins’s and John Feierabend.

Finger plays help children to develop their concentration and sequencing skills. In addition, finger plays provide an indirect preparation for reading when they are done from the left to the right (Campbell, 2000). Circle dances such as *Sally Go Round the*

Sun and Ring a Round the Rosey also indirectly prepare children for reading through kinesthetic movement (Campbell, 2000.) Action Songs such as *Head Shoulder's Knees and Toes If You're Happy and You Know It* and *The Hokey Pokey* help children to develop concentration, sequencing, and high order thinking skills (Campbell, 2000).

Singing and reading to children with enthusiasm releases positive brain chemicals in a child's brain which leads to the joy of learning. The Brain really learns best when it is in a positive and exciting environment (Campbell, 2000). As parents it is important to share music that you enjoy with your children so your children can grow to appreciate and enjoy music. Taking your children to concerts that are age appropriate is another way to encourage their musical development before they are ready to start formal music lessons. So when should children begin to start music lessons? Expose your children to as much music as you can before they are born and during their early childhood years. There are many wonderful early child hood music programs, such as Kindermusik, Musikgarten, and Music Together that can help to build your child's music readiness for future success on a musical instrument. As parents and caregivers it is important to expose your children to music learning opportunities with out putting any pressure on the child to stick with it. Music is a process oriented art for a child during their early years. As a parent modeling your love of music and creating a musical environment for your child at home can lead to a life long love of music for your children. *Aia no I ka mea e mele ana. (Let the singer select the song. _ Hawaiian Proverb*

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