

Kindermusik Classes – On the Path to Reading (“Our Time”)

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INTRODUCTION

You’ve heard it said, you’ve read it, you’ve *felt it* in your bones: every moment of the first three years of your child’s life is a learning experience. By the time he or she is just three years old, in fact, your child’s brain will have grown to 90% of its eventual adult weightⁱ—but as with the rest of us, having that weight and *making the most of it* aren’t the same!

The good news is that by simply talking, singing, and reading to your child, you are literally “turning on” his or her brain cells.ⁱⁱ And even more good news: by participating in Kindermusik classes—playing instruments, singing, listening to stories, and learning with music with your child—you’ve already begun not only providing him or her with important social, emotional, and brain-building experiences, but also building reading readiness, one essential component of overall readiness for school.

Just as your child developed important language skills before he or she began to speak, a child also develops literacy skills before being able to read.ⁱⁱⁱ According to experts, learning to read is dependent on “the foundational skills of phonological processing, print awareness, and oral language.”^{iv} So, when it comes to reading . . . how does Kindermusik fit in?

ACTIVE LISTENING

What is it?

Babies come into the world with brains hard-wired for listening. A fetus in the third trimester can already hear its mother’s heartbeat and other environmental sounds, including music.^v During the first year of life, infants develop their listening skills further, responding increasingly to music, language, and tone.^{vi} Listening is a major avenue for learning: hearing and recognizing the voices of different familiar people; recognizing the connection of certain sounds (e.g., lullabies vs. active songs) to certain activities (sleep vs. play); or simply knowing that a parent’s voice or footsteps signal that food, a dry diaper, or comfort is coming.

Listening seems like such a simple thing, hardly something that takes training—but how many times have you thought *I know he can hear me, but he’s just not **listening!*** In cases like these, the word *listening* (in contrast to *hearing*) is really being used to mean *paying attention, focusing, understanding, or “getting it”*. This kind of listening, called *active listening*, is a skill that does, in fact, take practice and even instruction.^{vii} But here’s the rub—it’s also a skill that is essential to school success. The way most schools are set up, up to 75% of the time your child will spend in a classroom will be spent learning through listening!^{viii}

Here's where music comes in. Researchers believe that music instruction helps children build active listening skills.^{ix} By "tuning in" to music and other specific sounds carefully, one at a time, and with full attention, children hone their listening skills. Through songs and chants, children develop an ear for the patterns of sounds in words, phrases, and sentences. And as children listen to and sing words set to music, they become familiar with other sounds, rhymes, rhythms, and patterns in language.

Developmental Milestones: Listening

By the age of three, many children can:

- Point to the source of a sound, such as a telephone ringing.
- Understand and respond when you say "Let's put the blocks in the box."
- Respond to a question like "Where are your shoes?" by showing you her shoes.
- Point to his or her head when you sing "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes."

NOTE: Every child is unique, and different children may reach milestones at different times. If you're concerned about your child's development, talk to your pediatrician.

How It Works in Class

- **Listen.** You and your toddler stop, focus, and listen to the sound, for example, of a baby elephant.
- **Connect.** Your child hears the teacher's directions, hears your voice repeating the words, and learns to focus on the sounds entering his or her ears and connect them to the concepts you describe: *Listen to the sound of a baby elephant.*
- **Imitate.** You and your child will use vocal play to playfully repeat the sounds you hear.
- **Discuss.** Together, the class may discuss what they heard, what it sounded like, and how the sounds were different.

What You Can Do at Home

- **Sounds Around the Home.** Listen actively to the sounds around your home: a clock ticking, the creaks of floorboards, a garbage truck outside.... Imitate and discuss the sounds.
- **Be a Good Listener.** Model active listening by being very attentive to what your child says, whether words, short sentences, or just sounds.
- **Stop the Music.** Use the songs on your Kindermusik CDs for a simple version of musical chairs that teaches careful listening. Listen for the music to stop, then freeze!

VOCABULARY

What is it?

How do we raise children to have and use a good vocabulary?

Believe it or not, researchers have found that the number of words a child knows by the age of three is one of the most reliable predictors of his or her reading ability in third grade.^x Children who have had word-rich experiences in the first three years of life usually already display about twice the vocabulary of children who do not.^{xi}

Fortunately, researchers point out that children gain most of their vocabulary simply by listening to and talking with adults. In other words, *you* are the most important source of new words for your child! Research shows that when parents engage young children in singing songs, reciting rhymes, telling stories, and introducing other enriching activities, the children's vocabulary and language improve.^{xii} Researchers also suggest that songs are a great source of new words, motivating children to understand new vocabulary through playful interactions^{xiii}. Your positive attitude about reading, singing, and word-learning makes all the difference in your child's interest in learning to read.^{xiv}

Experienced teachers know that movement helps solidify the meanings of new words.^{xv} Songs, poems, and rhymes that have accompanying movements to emphasize the word meanings, in fact, have been found to be particularly effective in helping children gather and retain new words in their vocabularies.^{xvi} Of course, vocabulary is not just about understanding the words spoken to you (called *receptive* language)—it's also about being able to use those words in your own speaking (*expressive* language). A major accomplishment of the first three years of life is for your child to begin to put his or her ideas and feelings into words to communicate with others.^{xvii} Researchers believe that as a playful avenue for children to vocalize and communicate, singing contributes to young children's language development.^{xviii}

Developmental Milestones: Vocabulary

In a word-rich environment, by the age of three, your child most likely:

- Hears up to 30,700 words per day.
- Knows and uses over 200 words.
- Is beginning to use prepositions (*in, on*); pronouns (*he, we*); and information words (*who, where, what, why*).
- Combines words to speak in two- to three-word sentences.
- Makes his needs and wants known through spoken words and motions.

How It Works in a Kindermusik Class

- **Listen.** Every Kindermusik class is naturally vocabulary-rich, with songs, rhymes, poems, and stories at the heart of much of the action.
- **Learn.** Your child hears a word or sound and is challenged, with your guidance, to react physically, i.e., by moving a scarf *high* when he or she hears the word *high*, accompanied by high music, and *low* when he or she hears the word *low*, accompanied by low music.
- **Express.** Together you and your child can speak the words of poems and rhymes, sing the words to songs, and engage in conversation with teacher and classmates, all of which build vocal ability, expressiveness, and language confidence.

What You Can Do at Home

- **Talk, Talk, Talk!** Play sportscaster for the events in your child’s life. As you walk around town or play with blocks, describe what your child sees and does.
- **Expand On Her Words.** When your child says something like, “More water!”, expand on what he or she has said by replying with something like, “You finished all of your water. You must have been very thirsty after playing outside this afternoon. Now you want more water. OK, I’ll pour it into your cup”
- **Word Soup.** As you make your way through the world together, encourage your child to make unlikely combinations of words. While making dinner or going grocery shopping, for example, name a series of silly things you might put into in a crazy soup: carrots, potatoes, bicycles, hot dogs, rocks Combining words and concepts in unusual ways not only helps your child develop new vocabulary *and* develop a sense of humor!

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS

What is it?

Long before your child can tell you that the magnetic letter “m” on your refrigerator stands for the /m/ sound, he or she is building sensitivity to the sounds of spoken language. By the time a child is three years old, he or she has a lot of listening experience, and has come to understand more than you might guess about the sound system of your native language!^{xix}

Researchers call this *phonological awareness*, or “a general appreciation of the sounds of speech, as distinct from their meaning.”^{xx} Phonological awareness is a very important step in the journey to learning to read. In fact, a child’s level of sound awareness upon entering school “may be the single most powerful determinant of the success he or she will experience in learning to read.”^{xxi} Academic research has proven that the playful experiences a parent has with a young toddler can have a positive impact on that child’s level of phonological awareness later, at ages three and four.^{xxii}

From the perspective of a parent, however, phonological awareness crops up most prominently in a few ways. It begins with an awareness of the spoken contours of speech (for example, using rising pitch to signal a question). Researchers have found that music often follows intonation patterns that coincide well with language learning.^{xxiii} Brain studies of eight-year-old children, amazingly, show that children who started musical training at the ages of four or five are better at processing the pitch changes within spoken language than similar children without musical training.^{xxiv}

Phonological awareness continues as children begin to notice syllables and sounds *within* words (for example, “number” can be divided into two chunks: *num-* and *-ber*. To help children hear these “beats” within words, educational experts suggest using music, which naturally divides words into sounds.^{xxv}

The next step in phonological awareness is rhyming. Early experiences recognizing, repeating, and predicting rhymes are a perfect and age-appropriate way to build phonological sensitivity. Researchers believe that word play of all kinds contributes to phonological awareness,^{xxvi} so the more, the better. In fact, research now supports something many Kindermusik educators and parents have suspected for years—a strong link between children’s knowledge of nursery rhymes at age three and success in reading and spelling when those same children enter school.^{xxvii}

Developmental Milestones: Phonological Awareness

By the age of three, your child will most likely be able to:

- Repeat *e-i-e-i-o* or other favorite song lyrics.
- Notice repeating sounds, such as *buh* in *bumble bee*.
- Fill in rhyming words in a predictable song.
- Make up a word game, i.e., *funny, bunny, money*.

How It Works in a Kindermusik Class

- **Word Play.** The often silly, often rhyming, and always engaging rhymes, poems, and song lyrics featured in Kindermusik classes give your child a chance to speak and sing, practicing rhyming, word play, and predicting skills.
- **Sound Play.** They don’t just learn from words! Sounds and syllables, even nonsense ones, are enough to get your child’s language brain cells buzzing.
- **Vocal Play.** You and your child get to really see what your voices can do. Using voices to make high and low sounds, “smooth” and “bumpy” sounds, sounds of animals, water running, popcorn popping, you name it—it all adds up to more awareness of sounds, how to make them, and how they can come together to build words.

What You Can Do at Home

- **Clap to the Beat.** Help your child tune in to the rhythms of spoken words by clapping along with favorite nursery rhymes.
- **Big Bad Bug.** Stringing together words that begin with the same sound (*yellow, ukulele, yahoo*), end with the same sound (*kitten, mitten, written*), or have other things in common expands your child’s collection of familiar phonemes.
- **Rhyme Time.** Together, build strings of rhyming words (they don’t have to be “real” words—the goal is to explore the *sounds*, not the *meanings* of words). Start with simple, single-syllable words, but challenge yourselves to build as long a list as you can (i.e., bat, cat, dat, fat, gat, hat, jat . . .).
- **Get Silly With Sounds.** Easy and fun—start tossing silly rhymes into your everyday routines. Try *See you later, alligator!*, *Ready, Freddy?*, or even *Time for lunchy-munchy!*

PRINT AWARENESS

What is it?

Experts agree that *print awareness* is an important predictor of reading success.^{xxviii} Print awareness entails an understanding of the idea that letters can come together to build words, which can come together to build sentences; that these letters, words, and sentences are used to convey meaning; and that there is a certain way that printed materials, such as books, work (you read from left to right, turn the pages, etc.). When a child understands *concepts of print*, he or she understands how adults use printed words in their everyday lives (grocery lists, street signs, etc.) and the basics of how printed shapes work to convey messages.^{xxix} Here’s why it matters: children whose parents read books aloud to them early—when they are toddlers and even infants—have significantly elevated language abilities later on.^{xxx}

Developmental Milestones: Print Awareness

By the age of three, your child can probably:

- Listen carefully to and enjoy books that you read aloud.
- Recognize a favorite book by its cover.
- Understand that books are handled in a certain way.
- Pretend to “read” books.
- Begin to tell the difference between writing and drawing.
- Show interest in writing, possibly making more letter-like forms.

How It Works in a Kindermusik Class

- **Listen, Look, Learn.** Every Kindermusik class includes a musical story with which educator, parents, and children engage, move, and vocalize. When children hear books and stories read aloud, the benefits can hardly be overstated: they build listening skills, learn new words, and are actually motivated to hear *more* books read aloud^{xxxix}. In fact, researchers suggest that song picture books, like most of the books included with Kindermusik curricula, are particularly well-suited for building language skills and print awareness!^{xxxix}

What You Can Do at Home

- **World of Words.** Fill your house with words! Being surrounded by words—written and spoken—is the biggest key to boosting your child into a life of language. Post poems, storybook pages, lists, labeled images—you name it—around your house. A home full of words is the perfect learning environment for a child’s growing mind!
- **Free Books!** Don’t forget about the library. Your child will, no doubt, have his or her favorite books that you’ll own and read again and again—but replenishing and refreshing your coffers on a regular basis is a terrific way to expose him or her to the endless diversity of books.
- **Keep Kindermusik Rolling.** Kindermusik home materials provide a book and audio recording to read, sing, and explore again at home. With those tools, storytime can become anything from quiet together time to a raucous dance party! But no matter what, when you share your positive attitude about literacy through sharing books and singing, you are setting your child on the path to becoming a successful reader.^{xxxix}

YOU + KINDERMUSIK = ALL THE RIGHT STUFF

If there’s one thing all the recent research proves without a doubt, it’s that *you* are the biggest factor in determining your child’s readiness for and interest in reading. Reading to your child, singing with your child, and talking with your child—in other words, surrounding your child with words of all kinds—are the best, easiest, and most fun ways to prepare him or her for a lifetime of reading.

Another thing is clear, though: the kind of learning your child does in Kindermusik—engaging in active, focused listening exercises; building both receptive and expressed vocabulary; expanding awareness of phonemes, the building blocks of language; and exploring an awareness of how the printed word works to communicate—has been proven repeatedly and convincingly to be the kind of learning that is specifically linked to success in school.

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