

So You Think You Can Sing?

More likely you think you *can't* sing! This is a common complaint among parents with young children. Thinking you can't sing could be affecting the number of musical experiences you provide for your children. Music plays an important role in your child's development of literacy skills. Songs, movement and musical games of childhood have been called "brilliant neurological exercises" that introduce children to speech patterns, sensory motor skills and all the essential movement skills every child needs.

Your ability to carry a tune and the quality of your voice doesn't even factor into the immense value of sharing rhymes, and songs. Young children are very forgiving and usually don't judge us for our musical attempts (at least not in early childhood!). Actually, studies show that babies prefer your voice, and the accompanying facial expressions and body language, over recorded music.

Music is a powerful tool and a great way to socially engage children of all ages to learn. Brain research tells us that both talking and singing to a baby or toddler significantly speeds up the process of learning new words. Combining words with music invites your child to use both sides of his brain simultaneously-words are processed by the left half of the brain while melody affects the right hemisphere. Music makes language come alive!

From very early in life babies respond to the rhythms and repeating patterns in nursery rhymes and songs and learn that if they listen and wait just a little, something pleasurable usually happens-a tickle, a hug, a kiss or a gentle bounce. Babies begin to associate language with the pleasurable experience of melody. Repeating the sounds your baby makes will encourage even more sound play! Their cooing and babbling will become more purposeful when they hear music and make attempts to respond when they get a positive response from you. As they get older, toddlers will attempt to match their movements to the music, spontaneously dancing and singing to the music they hear.

Singing also encourages eye contact and positive interaction between adults and children, promoting a wonderful secure attachment. It's hard not to smile when you sing and sway to the tunes. Singing can help settle fussy babies and engage and promote interactions with alert ones. Singing is a win-win for everyone! The earlier music is introduced, the more potential a child has for learning. Infants, toddlers and young preschoolers need to be surrounded by words, and singing can slow down our language and make it more fun and repetitive.

Singing can help children hear (and isolate) the beginning, middle and endings of words which are important for learning language and later reading skills. Songs and rhymes can become a child's first stories full of wonderful characters and a predictable sequence of events.

Singing builds vocabulary and may introduce words that are not typically used in your child's day to day conversations. Vocabulary is such a strong predictor of reading success that any opportunity to develop a child's repertoire of words both through spoken and understood vocabulary is worthwhile. Music helps develop listening and speaking skills all while children are having fun.

Even if you consider yourself non-musical, your child will follow you in most attempts at singing and musical games. Music is socially engaging and a great way to learn and enhance our memory skills and attention spans. We know that children need lots of repetition of rhymes and verses to practice language and experiment with creating their own songs and incorporating music into their play. Activities and tasks connected to music are easier to remember. Sing when it's time to tidy up or put on your coat or get ready for bed. Use a familiar tune and change the words to match the tasks.

Music touches us all. Singing stirs up memories, brings comfort, entertains and promotes language. Music is important in the life of a child and it is a natural part of most children's experiences right from birth. Singing is a wonderful way to build loving relationships with your children and support literacy learning. Tra-la-la-la-la, la-la-la-la!

Donna Kaye is an early literacy specialist in Hastings-Prince Edward counties. She can be reached at Family Space, dkaye@familyspace.ca