

Where Do I Start?

How do I teach a child a song? What do I do? What do I need to know to teach a child a song? Where do I start?

This chapter covers the step most often missed by new teachers, and even teachers who have taught for a while. The things described in these pages make a huge difference from the core outward. There is power in pondering the ideas I am about to describe. However, it takes tenacity and patience with yourself to consider these things, instead of just diving into action first.

The Guiding Steps

Let's bring what you really want to have happen with the children and the song "out in the open", making crystal clear to yourself what your goals are. This will guide you, and shape how you plan your teaching.

What are your goals as you teach a child a song? What do you want to have happen? How do you want to be involved in the process? How do you want the child to be involved in the process? How do you want the child to be involved with the song?

Next, stand back and use a bit of your imagination to take you into the teaching world. Pause... if you could envision what it might be like to teach a group of children a song, could you describe it? What would it look like? What would it sound like? What would it feel like?

Envision in your mind's eye... Focus on the children. Now focus on the teacher. Focus on the feel in the room as a whole. What does it look like? What does it sound like? What does it feel like?

Let's take a look...

What Would It Look Like?

A Child's Eyes - I look to a child's eyes as I teach. I know wonderful things are happening inside a child by the look in their eyes. A child's eyes sparkle and fill with wonder when they are *truly engaged*. A child's eyes are intensely fixed upon the scene when they are *taking in the whole experience*. A child's eyes are twinkling with the fun of play when there is *an experience that lights up their world*. A child's eyes show deep emotion and concern when their *soul is stretched with compassion or tenderness*. I look at a child's eyes to gauge the teaching experience.

A Teacher's Eyes - Likewise, a teacher's eyes are sparkling with the *fun of play* as he or she teaches. A teacher's eyes are a *mirror of the experience* between the children and the teacher. If there is *compassion* being taught in the song, a teacher's eyes

reflect that. If there is faith being taught in the song, a teacher's eyes *reflect* the intensity and steadiness of that faith.

A Child's Body Language - Body language speaks loudly from a child, especially a young child. Many of them have not yet learned to mask their *discontent* or their feeling of being *unfulfilled* during an experience. They show their *dissatisfaction* "loudly" in their bodies. In contrast, they also do not mask their *exuberance* or *delight* as they react to an activity they enjoy. I judge the effectiveness and success of our experience together by watching a child's body. I watch the intensity with which *a child's body is riveted to the presentation*. I watch which way a child's body is leaning... even if they are turned away from me, I know they are *engaged* by the way the body leans. I watch the *fluidity of a child's movements* to see if the actions and activities I have chosen are too complex, too simple, or within do-ability for the child. I watch for *manifestations of frustration, or delight, or thoughtfulness in a child's body*. I watch for the way a child is reacting to the music experience through their body.

A Teacher's Body Language - A teacher's body also speaks loudly about the whole experience. I watch as a teacher moves about the room, touching a shoulder here, looking straight into eyes over there, giving a help with a tapping pattern nearby. A teacher is constantly *engaging with individual children* all over the room and I can see that in her body language. A teacher's body movements are also *a model of the action, an example of the pattern, and an illustration of total focus and involvement* that the children can have by being totally immersed in the experience. If the teacher is *totally in the experience, being authentic with what he or she truly feels and what he or she is teaching*, I can see that in the body.

Level of Play - I truly believe human beings need play in their lives. Over the years, I have read of many great researchers who have proven over and over again that children learn best through play.¹ When things are going well in our music time together, I watch to "see" *the level of play between the children and myself*. Do we thoroughly *enjoy being together in the experience*? Is there a *give and take between the children and the teacher* (as between two people involved in good play)? Are we *both immersed in the play experience* (sometimes hardly noticing outside influences or adults sitting on the fringes)? To judge if what I'm doing to teach music to a child is going to make a difference, I consider the amount of play that is present. I look at *the delight in the face of a child*. I look at *the intensity of a child's focus*. I look at the smile that tugs occasionally at the child's mouth. I look at the children to see if they are in a play mode (recognizing that sometimes play is a very *serious business* for children). I look at the whether or not *the child is immersed in the story, or the puzzler, or the body movement*. I look to see that both the child and I are *enjoying the moment*.

¹ To read more on the profound of effect of play in a child's learning, you might want to look at the following: (note research here xx)

So what does the description look like for me? The children's eyes and teacher's eyes are alive and bright. The eyes beautifully mirror the sense and feel of the song they are learning. Their bodies are riveted on the activity. Their faces show delight. The children and the teacher are in play mode and their eyes, their bodies, and their whole being is *involved* in the experience...often approaching the world through play.

What does your own personal description look like? Take a moment and describe it to yourself.

What Would it Sound Like?

A Teacher's Voice - I know wonderful things are happening if I hear the teacher's voice occasionally whispering or talking, but more *often singing with the children* (even though singing might not be the teacher's forte). To sing is to re-produce. One of my incredibly skilled mentor teachers, Susan Kenny², often told me that a two year old needs to **hear** a song 200 times to make it his or hers. I feel like a three year old needs to hear a song about 100 times, and a 4 year old needs to hear a song at least 50 times before being able to RE-produce it within themselves as "their" song.³

Do you really have to hear a song that many times? Why? Consider this. To sing means to re-produce pitches that you have heard, and match words to specific rhythms. To learn to sing a song, a child has to hear and assimilate the pitch, meaning to make the exact pitch a reality in the small muscles of the voice box... we take it for granted, but it really is a complicated process to sing on pitch! A child also has to sense rhythmic sensation in their body and then make their voice follow that. In addition, by listening a child senses tonal production and quality (how to make the vibrations and where the vibrations happen in the body), the implied harmony (combining pitches together), and many more elements of music BEFORE they can make the song truly their own. Ownership of the song is the process that happens before being able to sing that song of their own accord, both within their mind (silent listening inside your own head sometimes called audiation) and out in the world (producing sound out in the room).

² Susan Kenney served MENC (Music Educators National Conference) as both a presenter at their many conferences, and as one of the chief organizers of an Early Childhood Music Conference in Washington D.C. She served as an associate professor of music for 25 (check this xx) years at Brigham Young University teaching elementary school teachers the art of teaching music to a child.

³ You might notice how a young child will repeat, repeat, and repeat a song phrase or an action. Sometimes a child will ask to hear the same song over and over and over again. They are meeting their innate need for repetition in order to learn.

As I hear a classroom with children (especially young children) learning a song, I listen for the teacher *singing the song again and again*, sometimes as the only one singing. I listen for the song to be sung to the children many, many times in a *variety* of presentation modes⁴. Children learn to sing first by being sung to, and then by singing themselves.

A Child's Voice - A child that is enjoying the learning experience is often not very quiet. What would I hear from those children? I listen for the *happy exclamations* of childhood. I hear the *enthusiastic responses* of the children to the teacher's questions or challenges. I listen for the *movement noises* that come as the children move to the beat or rhythm of the music. I hear the *contrasts* of loud and soft voices as the children react to the teacher working with dynamics as part of the experience. I listen for occasional giggles and squeals of laughter as the children find something that delights them in the presentation. I hear the children *responding* to the interactive process, yet totally clued into the teacher and *their experience together*.

Less Talk - The sounds of the teacher in a successful presentation are not what you might expect. If I hear a teacher talking for most of the learning experience, I know that the children are not learning the essence of the song through the song itself. The children are not involved and participating. The sense of play is gone. In a description of sounds, the teacher is usually singing with the children or letting them sing. *There is very little talking on the teacher's part*. I listen for only two or three sentence directives from the teacher, before the momentum of the learning experience swings straight into an activity with involvement and singing. As that activity moves towards another activity, I don't hear the teacher telling information, nor even explaining much. He or she just launches straight into the next activity. I listen for *mostly doing, very short explanations, and not much talking by the teacher*.

Ebb and Flow - Much like the waves of the sea, a presentation that is truly involving the children and peaking their interest has *an ebb and flow, a rise and a fall*. There will be high intensity, followed by a release and more gentle activity. Perhaps then will come an active movement after which comes a focused non-moving presentation. I call this whole concept "the flow"⁵. I listen for the up and down of the intensity, the high concentration *focus*, and consequent *release* with a change of

⁴ Look at the chapter in this book called "Consider This for Success" under the heading The Brain Craves Variety to read about the principle of presenting the same song in a variety of ways in order to meet the child's need to hear the song many, many times without shutting the brain down because of sameness. The research is fascinating. For different ideas to present the song, look at the section called "Teach All of Me" under the chapter "Activities." You could also look at the chapters entitled "What Works With Older Children" and "What Works With Younger Children." You might also want to see the chapter called "Putting it All Together" under the heading Planning: The Brain Craves Variety.

⁵ More information about "flow" is available in the chapter called "Putting it All Together" under the heading called Planning: Flow.

pace, ... all of the change of “tempo” and “intensity” that comes with a presentation with flow. I listen for the concentrated quiet of a story moment, the bursts of excitement as the children react to a movement, the fleet moment of intent listening to a teacher’s singing, and the change of children’s voices and body movement noises that signal they are involved in a lesson with flow. The best kind of flow is one with *smooth transitions in and out of the different levels of activity*⁶

What does a description of the sounds of a successful presentation sound like for me? I hear a teacher singing⁷ as part of an activity that has the children *involved and moving*. I hear the happy sounds of *children absorbed in a learning experience*, often with some kind of movement. I hear the push and pull, the energy up and energy down, and the stress then release of a *learning flow*. I don’t hear the teacher talking much. Music is not a subject where a teacher can pile information upon a child and have the encounter reach his soul. To lead, guide, and lighten the soul of a child, a *teacher is the model of the song experience and its feel*, which means the teacher needs to wholly experience the song in a real, *authentic* way.

Take a moment. What does your description sound like?

What Would it Feel Like?

Renew Energy – Enjoy – Be curious – Connect – Trust - Sitting in a classroom where *bodies, hearts, and minds are involved* in learning a song, one can almost reach out and touch the electricity in the room. There is a *lift of spirits and a renewal of energy* that you can feel. As children are involved in *whole heartedly learning* a song, I feel a spark in the room. I feel an intense desire to “figure something out” coming from the children, especially because of their natural sense of curiosity. I sense a feeling of fun and enjoyment, both from the teacher and the children. I feel the strength of an entire united group *enjoying a moment together*.⁸ I feel a *connection*

⁶ You can read more about transitions from one activity to the next in the chapter entitled “Putting It All Together” under the heading Transitions. Transitions are a place where we lose children’s attention, where energy is allowed to dissipate, and where the momentum and unity we have worked to build in the presentation can all be lost. Smooth transitions from activity to activity are such a blessing to any presentation!

⁷ The human voice has a different sound wave than the piano or another musical instrument. It is easier for a child to interpret and assimilate the sound wave of the human voice singing rather than the sound waves of an instrument or recording, making a strong case for why we need to sing **live** again and again to our children.

⁸ One of the natural outcomes of making music together is the ability of music to unite an entire group of people, despite their individual differences. When a room full of children is lending their energy at the same time to the same song and with the same purposes, there is an incredible power not found often in other types of activities. This unifying effect has a beautiful influence on a children’s soul and on our souls when we hear it.

between the teacher and the children. They are experiencing something together. I feel an expectation from the group - whatever happens there together *will be good and safe for each of them*. I feel a *desire to learn* coming from the children. I feel the teacher reaching out with compassion, love, and excitement to the children. I sense trust from the children⁹.

A feeling of wonder within me wells up... it is the sense that something very good is happening here. All of these things, *natural curiosity, fun, enjoyment, unity, connection, good expectations, desire, and trust* are each important and integral parts of the description of what an experience could be like when we teach a child a song. I sense and feel all of these things in just as real a way as the things I see or hear.

Take a quiet moment. What does your description feel like? What do you sense?

Summing Up

What do you see, what do you hear, and what do you feel as you walk into a classroom where children are learning a song? Let's sum it up. (You might want to add your own descriptions in the margin.)

1. The eyes are sparkling and show that the child is truly engaged and is taking in the whole experience. The eyes reflect light and are twinkling with the sense of play, or are reflecting the deeper emotions of the song.
2. The teacher's eyes reflect the emotions and strong feelings of the song. The teacher's demeanor is authentic to the mood and essence of the song. His or her eyes light up with the fun of experiencing the whole experience with the children. The eyes and body language show the teacher's authentic responses to the song as a model for the children.
3. The child's body shows he or she is engaged and the movements are somewhat fluid (confirming that the movement is not too difficult or frustrating for the individual ages and stages of the children). The teacher is moving about the room, attending to the different needs of the children - pulling them back into the experience, helping them calm their bodies, or guiding their movements to the song.
3. Both the teacher and the children are immersed in play and enjoying the moment. Both teacher and child are authentic to the emotion of the song they are experiencing.
4. Lots of singing and not much talking. Sounds of movement are directed by the presentation. Ebb and flow, rise and fall contrasts as the presentation flows along.
5. Sense of fun and enjoyment, of teacher and child being in the experience together.

⁹ To read more about using trust and creating trust in a group of children as an incredible and necessary learning environment, look at the chapter called "Consider This for Success" under the heading This Child Is Safe Here, and So Am I.

6. Feeling of trust, unity, and connection between the teacher and the children, and between the children themselves.

I learned from Lillian Katz¹⁰, an incredible educator, that a child will learn the attitude with which he or she is taught much more than they will ever remember the content of what it is they were taught. I consider this to be a guiding factor in my vision of the experience when I teach a child a song. What is my attitude about the children, about the song, and about the experience? What experiences will help the child to have an attitude of deep learning, enjoyment, and involvement?

So what if I want the children to enjoy singing, know the songs really well, and behave while I teach? Is that part of the vision? Yes. My emphasis in the past few pages has been to expand that vision a bit to include the attitude with which both you and the children approach the experience. That attitude of intrigue, fun, play, trust, and all the other things make a huge difference in the teacher's longevity (your ability to keep loving the experience) and your success. If you want to continue loving the experience and in addition truly affect the children through the teaching experience, those things dealing with attitude are essential.

Where Do I Go From Here?

So now that I have thought about what I want to happen as I teach a child a song, how do I get there? Where do I go from here? How do I get from just a vision to actually being able to have all those things happen?

An Overview

How do you best take in information? How do you best learn? Some adults love to read maps. Others are befuddled by maps. Some people need to read instructions in order to follow them. Others need to see something done, or at least see pictures in order to follow directions. We all learn (take in information) in a variety of different ways.¹¹

Children love variety when they learn. To engage their whole beings, a teacher needs to present kinesthetic activities (activities that use the body such as role play, hand signs, move to the word), mental challenges (word puzzles for older children, memory games, bringing order), rhythmic activities (body rhythms, rhythm instruments), color and picture challenges (picture concentration, puzzles pieces),

¹⁰ Lillian Katz worked as an educator of educators through her research. She served xx in the years xx

¹¹ The section called "Teach All of Me" goes into detail about different intelligences and learning styles in the chapter of the same name. A successful presentation and learning experience will use a variety of these intelligences.

group experiences (envelope game, body rhythms with a partner, mirror image), and activities that touch the spirit (story song, personal experience).¹²

A teacher needs to present a flow of activities that rise and fall. The teacher's focus is on getting the children involved in the activity with minimal instruction, then switching quickly to the new activity, also without much talk.

A teacher needs to present activities that are appropriate to the age of the children he or she is teaching. The teacher watches for frustration when a movement is too hard, or boredom when an activity is not challenging. The teacher recognizes that using the written word as a focus with young children might make many of the non-readers feel inadequate or frustrated. The teacher recognizes that at about age 9 or 10, children begin to question why, and the teacher uses that tendency in his or her presentation.¹³

The children need to sense that the teacher understands their need to move, their need to play, and their need to use their natural curiosity. The children need to sense that a teacher is excited to be with them, that a teacher will honor them even if they are not their best selves, and that the teacher will know enough about them to understand what they like to do.

A teacher needs to present activities that nurture trust and unity. Because music is a naturally unifying element of life, it only makes sense to plan activities that focus on this principle of unity. A teacher will be very strict about teaching children to honor each other in their actions and their comments, making sure to keep a feeling of trust in the group. Both of these principles are not fostered if there is competition between the children. Competition undermines unity and often injures trust. A teacher needs to plan activities that don't use competition as the motivation.

So where do I start?

1. Plan activities that use a variety of intelligences.
2. Plan a flow of activities.
3. Don't talk much. Mostly "do."
4. Plan activities that appropriate to the age of the child.
5. Plan activities that let the children move their bodies.
6. Plan activities that incorporate play.

¹² See the section "Teach All of Me" and the chapter "Activities" which lists over 30 different activities that have proven successful with children.

¹³ For more information on the shift in thinking, sometimes called the Logic stage, see the chapters entitled "What Works With Older Children" and "What Works With Younger Children" in the section "Teach All of Me."

7. Plan activities that children enjoy.
8. Plan activities that nurture trust and unity among the group.