

What works for Younger Children, part 2

Now that we know about five great learning modes that will reach a younger child, what are some activities that put these concepts into action? ¹

Activities that Work for Young Children²

Let's look first at purposeful movement, or the Learning style called *Kinesthetic*.

What movements would best help a child internalize both the music and the words to the music? What actions are needed by the brain at this developmental level to grow and advance? What physical engagement can we foster between the child and the song? Here are a few activities that have worked wonderfully for me:

Magic Crayon – When you want a child to move gently, smoothly, and slowly, what activity can you do as a teacher? I suggest Magic Crayon. Magic Crayon is just that: magic. This activity engages a child's imagination and sense of color. The focus is not on the body, but on the color and lines made by the imaginary crayon. The fluidity of the body and the gentleness naturally flow from that imagination place. The movements demonstrated by the teacher (and often successfully imitated by the children) are long, gentle, and fluid. When the essence of the song and words are thoughtful, reverent, and flowing, this activity captures that feeling in the child's body. It is a beautiful moment to watch and to experience.

Windwands – Recently when passing out the windwands to a group of young children, the two mothers watching commented that it was like children hovering around “waiting for candy” to be passed out! Indeed, the color and movement of the windwands are almost like sweets for the children. They love the colors of the ribbons and the air whirling through flapping the ribbons. They love the feeling of flight that comes as the ribbons seem to float in the air as they move to the steady beat. I use windwands for faster paced and rhythmic songs. I use windwands to

¹ For a more full explanation and some examples of what each of these activities is and looks like, please turn to the section of this book entitled “Activities” on pp. xx-xx. It is a great reference to understand and come to “know” these different activities so that you can use them with the children you teach.)

² Note: As you do these activities, recognize that young children have small vocal chords. It may be uncomfortable for adults to sing as high as a child's natural voice range, but children desperately need us to higher. The pitch just above middle c that we call “d” is the bottom of a young child's comfortable range. A middle c often has too much weight for a child's voice. Children this age often strain just slightly to hit that note (even if we as adults are very comfortable there.) If you want a child to learn to sing on pitch, you must sing within a range he or she can successfully copy.

cross the midlines of the body³ (so important for the brain and for the ability to read). I use the windwands with patterns, which help to pattern the children's brains. The delight of the windwand activity subtly transfers an attitude of fun to the whole singing experience.

Arm Swings – Children love to swing. They love to swing their arms, their legs, and their bodies. It is no surprise, then, that children love to sing their arms to the strong beats of the music. As we swing our arms in front of us, I will occasionally call out “Freeze,” and the children try to freeze right where they are. Their eyes sparkle as I try to surprise them about when we will stop the motion of the swing. I use this activity especially with songs that are set in 6/8 or 3/4 time. The energy of the swing transfers to the way the children feel the energy of the song.

Body Rhythm Patterns – A child chants the same sentence over and over again, or nods her head back and forth, and back and forth. The repetition of these simple things is often soothing, or invigorating. Walking around and around a chair helps a child to think what he really wants to say. Patterns, especially movement patterns, help the brain to work. Giving the child a movement pattern to do to a steady beat is a wonderful way to link up the child's brain to a song. Patsching, clapping, stomping, and tapping are wonderful tools for your toolbox. Young children need the clap, patsch, or other action to be repeated at least 4 times (if the song is in 4/4 time) before changing to a new action. More than 3 actions will exceed the three-year-olds “brain holding” capacity⁴, so I usually just make a pattern with two or three different actions to repeat as we sing the song.

Waves of the Sea – Mesmerized is one of the words that could describe a child sitting on the rocks watching the ocean waves come in and out. More than that, the ocean calls to the child to come and play, to come and be a part of the life teeming in that movement of water. In and out, in and out... I often asked the children to let their arms be like the waves of the ocean, sometimes coming in gently to the shore, then getting bigger and bigger, and crashing on the rocks. Immediately the waves

³ The body has two midlines: one from the top of the head down over the nose and through the middle of the body, and one that cuts the body in half with the torso and arms on the top half, and the legs on the bottom half. Each side and each half of the body is run by a different part of the brain, and the two sides need movement to cross over that dividing line in order for the brain to communicate well one side to the other. Restated: the parts of the body need to cross the two different midlines with movement.

⁴ Brain research tells us that a three year old has about three “places” in his or her memory sequence. As a child gets older, the brain increases the places of the memory to hold patterns or steps in a process (for instance, the steps in the sequence of dividing one number into another). An adult brain has about seven holding places... an interesting fact when you consider there are seven numbers in a telephone number. We increase our capacity by “clumping” things together to fit into one of the memory holding spaces.

seem to calm down again, or gather strength for another crash. As we continue to move our hands in and out, in and out, I begin to sing the song, using the motion of the musical phrases to determine the strength of our “wave.” I use this motion for songs that are more serious in nature. There is a hush that comes over the room as we move like waves to the music.

Location Steady Beats – Tap on your shoulders (eight times), now move to your knees. Can your hands follow my hands as we tap to the beat? I use this movement with songs that have a strong beat and a good pace. The challenge for the children is to move their arms with me to the new location as we tap out the steady beat. The words and melody of the song float in the “backdoor” of the children’s learning as they move. The steady beat molds and helps the frontal lobe of the brain to develop and mature more fully.

Sign Language – One of the most effective ways to use the body to remember words is to portray the word with an action. Although sign language used by the deaf community does not use major muscles (which young children need to move⁵), it is a wonderful way to combine both kinesthetic movement and concrete representation of the words of a song.

Scarves – The bright colors and wispy floating quality of scarves appeal to young children. When a child is asked to move the scarf gently to the flow of a gentle song, it magically transforms the child for a moment into that floating world. I use scarves to cross the midlines, to move both high and low and side to side. I use scarves to move to a slower gentle pace yet retain a sense of play with the wind in the sheer fabric.

Action Word Actions - Unlike the specific actions for specific words of American Sign Language, action word actions to a song take the action of a word like build, push, strong, or work and act it out. I ask the children what action they think would best show this word, then we do that action. Like sign language, they are representing a word in a concrete way, but often these actions use more of large motor movements.

Paper Plate – Tapping a steady beat is loud on a drum. Clapping the beat is also loud in a room of more than 10 children. Paper Plates are a great way to tap a beat without overwhelming the children’s ability to hear the song you are singing. I use paper plates to tap the beat. I use paper plates to imitate the circular motion of 6/8 phrase as the children scratch a circle with their fingernails on the plate. I use paper

⁵ Kathy Debenham, a dance instructor at Brigham Young University, did research on how often a child needs to move his or her major joints, such as the elbows, knees, hips, etc. She found that a younger child needs to move one of these parts of his body every 30 seconds. That’s a lot of movement that the child inherently needs and most of the movement is large motor movements!

plates as part of rhythm instrument ensemble (more about this under the style *Living Music*).

Partner Arm Swings –

Why do we need so many different kinds of activities for each of these teaching modes? The principle of “the brain craves variety, yet needs repetition” (see page xx) still holds sway for a young child, yet with some modifications for this specific age group. Have you ever listened to a child playing and heard them repeat a phrase over and over and over again? Have you watched a child get endless delight in going down a slide again and again, before they move on to the next big play toy? Young children repeat and repeat an enjoyable activity to fully maximize their body’s reaction to that activity. They seek after the same thing again and again until they have taken input and made brain connections to lay down a base for future learning. Because of that, young children love repeating an activity (IF it is enjoyable to them). This age still needs variety, but in a huge way needs more repetition than an older child would tolerate.

Visual Images

What are some activities that make a song come alive using *Visual Images and Story telling*?

Draw the Song –

Video Clips –

Melody Maps –

Put the Song in Order –