

Margré van Gestel
Music pedagogue
Hopveld 31
5482 LW SCHIJNDEL
The Netherlands
E mail: v_gestel@hotmail.com
E mail: info@zingendoemaarmee.nl

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Music in the early years: Research, Theory and Practice

**Workshop:
Educating the voice of young children**

Margré van Gestel

Keywords:

Home, Under-fours, Voice development, Songs, Music lessons.

Music in the home

The life of a young child is filled with Music. Even before birth the fetus can hear (at 23-24 weeks) and the singing development originates in the auditory and affective experiences of the developing fetus. The fetus remembers musical patterns and sounds and associates them with emotions. When parents sing for the unborn, the fetus can begin to form pre-birth relationships with parents and parents with them. (Whitwell, 1999)

Parents singing with their children are shaping the infant's vocal production through the interaction with the acoustic characteristics of maternal culture (Graham F. Welch)

Singing development in early childhood reflects the cultural context and the developmental process. Intuitively parents sing and speak to their baby at higher pitch levels, using a wider pitch range. They make longer pauses, and speak often at a slower rate. (Thurman & Welch, 2000; Welch, 2006)

But, due to contemporary lifestyle, parents don't have time and some leave their babies in automatic rockers with cassette music to listen to. But this does not promote singing. (or parent-child bonding!)

Helping parents to recall traditional repertoire of lullabies, play songs and songs for day care routines, may be a starting point to singing with their baby.

Musical interactions

It may appear that mothers are leading the interactions with their babies. But in success-full mother-baby interaction it is often the other way round. The smallest body language, facial and vocal cues and these responses are dictating the sequence of interactions. Equally, when babies have had enough, they will give "turn-off" signals. They may turn their heads away or even shut their eyes.

When you listen to anyone talking and singing to a baby they will intuitively slip into a specific style, known as infant directed. They will keep to simple words, organized in short phrases which are repeated. They will speak or sing slowly, with greater stress on certain words to make speech and singing more rhythmical, pause for longer than would be normal in adult speech and songs and use an expressive "sing-song", curving up and down the pitch. (H. Papousek 1996)

Singing for the baby helps building the relationship between mother and baby. Mother learns to understand and respond appropriately to baby's non verbal cues, and help their baby relax in moments of stress.

When parents sing to babies they instinctively hug, cradle, rock and stroke them. Being carried and swayed in time to music is very pleasurable to babies. Bodily contact and rhythmical movement are unified with singing.

In each age the human voice has a distinctive underlying anatomy and physiology that is capable of producing a diversity of "singing" behaviors. (Graham Welch, The child as musician)

In the first months of life, these 'sung' products are driven by basic human needs, before becoming more exploratory and melodic in nature.

Opportunities to engage in vocal play and exploration, to share singing games with peers and experts as well as improvise and compose their own songs are essential features of musical cultures that foster singing development.

Children who exceed the norms are likely to have been provided with a nurturing environment that is designed to match, celebrate, enable and extend individual singing expertise. Everyone has the potential to learn to sing. We need therefore, to continue to seek optimal ways to allow children to explore and extend their singing.

Development of singing

Researchers have been interested in children's singing since the start of the twentieth century. When we have a look at the development of singing we have to start with the first cry. In the first cry of a newborn baby we find all the elements of singing: variations of pitch, variations in intensity, rhythmic and melodic patterns and sentence structure. (Vihman, 1996)

The primary function of the infant larynx is to protect the airway and to aid in swallowing. The high placement of the larynx in the vocal tract results in the infant vocalizing in a fairly high range. (*Musical lives of children John Flohr*) The larynx of a new born baby is not just a miniature of the adult organ. It shows differences in its position (a high place, baby: between C2¹ and C3, age five: between C4 and C5) in the composition and in environmental adaptation. (ECKEL, Sprinzi, Koebke, Damm Stennert *Zur Anatomie von Glottis und Subglottis beim Kindlichen Kehlkopf*. Kohl 1997 Springer Verlag)

Over the first six months of life the larynx undergoes dramatic change, along with the rest of the vocal tract, to more closely resemble the adult version. (*Sasaki, Suzuki and Horiuchi, 1977*)

The first year of life is characterized by increasingly diverse vocal activity like: cooing, producing vowel like sounds, musical babbling and vocal play.

Song Acquisition Development

Ages	Behavior
Birth to 6 months	Cooing, vowel like sounds and babbling with intonation
6-12 months	Imitate others. Mostly descending intervals
12-18 months	Glissandos
18-20 months	Discrete pitches, melodic and rhythmic patterns begin to appear
18-24 months	Sings small group of notes. Creates short spontaneous songs with small melodic intervals and flexible rhythm patterns. Able to learn to produce short melodic patterns from simple songs.
24 months	Sings phrases. Uses melodic patterns from learned songs in spontaneous singing.
2-3 years	Sings parts of songs. Imitates short songs or melodies, but not always accurately. May change melody to better accommodate the voice range.
3 years +	Sings whole songs.

¹ Cervical vertebrae

This behavioral sequence seems consistent among children, the ages at which each child exhibits these behaviors is inconsistent. Many environmental factors (e.g. familial vocal use, native language) influence children's singing. Research on how singing generally develops remains inconclusive and difficult to generalize, indicating individual variability in young children's voices. Much research with preschool and elementary aged children seems to focus on their ability to sing in tune. Singing in tune is important but should not be an issue of concern before the child has healthy use of the voice. Often children do not sing in tune because they have not developed enough vocal strength to do so, or they use the voice inappropriately. (John Flohr)

Singing:

1. is a psychomotor skill
2. requires precision movements
3. uses cartilages, muscles and ligaments
4. makes simultaneous use of vertical, lateral and rocking movements
5. aims for gracefulness in movement

If not executed properly may result in physical injury.

Everyone who is involved in teaching singing to young children should have a basic understanding of the physical working of the voice of these young children.

Music in Early Childhood settings in The Netherlands

In The Netherlands, Early Childhood Music Education started in 1989 with the Early Childhood Music teacher training "Music on the Lap". Nowadays a 'Music on the lap' course is a regular item in music schools and many 'Music on the Lap' teachers have a regular job in one of the 82 'SKON' Day Care Centers.

In music schools 'Music on the lap' teachers work with parents and children age 4 months to 4 years. Each child attends the lessons with one parent or caretaker. Early childhood music courses consist mostly of 8-10 lessons. Each group has 8-12 children and the lessons are 30 to 45 minutes.

In SKON day care centers Mol teachers work with different age groups on a regular basis of 40 music lessons a year.

In the Netherlands, during a one year training, musicians learn to prepare well balanced, well structured music lessons, taking into account the culture, the music, the age of the children, providing suitable materials: toys as well as music instruments. They also provide parents songs for day care routines. The musicians learn how to link listening, moving, playing, dancing and singing activities to the development of the children.

The early childhood music teacher should be able to provide structure, creating logical and musical transitions between music activities and taking care for repetition of songs, at least 5 or 6 times.

In working with the children (and parents or nurses), teachers should give a good musical example by singing in the right pitch, with good voice, playing instruments musically and providing enough suitable games, songs and music for parents and children to play with at home.

Practice

Singing is the most important part of music lessons with young children. We distinguish songs sung for the baby or toddler and songs for independent singing of the under fours themselves.

An example of a song to sing for your baby, composed by a MoL student; "a little bit tired":

Translation:

Go to sleep now, you are a little bit tired. I saw you yawn, close your eyes. Have a nice dream; your mother is close by. Let sleep overwhelm you, dearest child of mine.

Beetje moe.

Marit Eijkelkamp 2001

D A Bm Bm/A G G/Fis Em Asus A

Ga nu maar lek-ker sla - pen, je bent een beet-je moe. Ik zag je net al ga - pen,

8 A D D A Bm Bm/A

doe je oog-jes toe. Ga maar lek - ker dro - men, ma - ma is dicht

13 G G/Fis Em Asus A A D

bij. Laat de slaap maar ko - men. Lief - ste Hil - de van mij.

Singing of children 12-24 months

While observing children from one to two we hear them vocalize with their own movement or the movement of toys, they make sounds to animate toys, sing snatches of songs and rework them in play. They also sing long strands of melodies to open vowel sounds.

Singing games and spoken rhymes continue from the lullabies and play-songs of babyhood. One-to one singing games usually involve a combination of movement, song and mini-drama. The physical closeness and movement are important elements in these games. Repetition is the key. The child will ask: again, again. The one-to one games make it possible for them to participate fully. Adults singing one to one provide adaptable versions of songs. Bringing together a group of children from one to two year makes singing quite different. They watch, imitate, and in the end they participate actively. During free play moments they sing spontaneous phrases of songs.

Examples of independent singing 24-36 months

Potpourri song: Move (Verhuizen). Sung by Fridolijn (august 1988)

A beautiful example of a three year old girl singing her own song. Special attention to all the elements of the European song culture!

Singing 36-48 months

Video: On a big toadstool (Op een grote paddestoel): Nina born 14-08-2003 recorded 10-10-2006: 38 months



Op een grote paddestoel

traditoneel

Musical notation for the song "Op een grote paddestoel". The notation is in 3/4 time and G major. The lyrics are:

Op een gro-te pad-de-stoel, rood met wit-te stip-pen, zat ka-bou-ter Spil-le-been heen en weer te wip-pen.
 9
 Krak! zei toen de pad-de-stoel met een die-pe zucht, en zijn been-tjes vlo- gen: hoe-pla in de lucht.

Songs to sing independent for “under fours” have some characteristics:

- Short songs.
- Amplitude (d1-b1)
- Songs include voice training and sound reproduction
- Simple rhythm and measures
- Simple intervals, surprises are welcome
- Accents conform the language to breath automatically

- Lots of physical games to support the words

We have to keep in mind that singing together is fun, and an accompaniment is not (always) necessary. You don't learn singing from / with a cd.

Another example of a Dutch song suitable for children aged 3-4 to sing independently:

Translation:

Chipmunk with your long tail. Jump real fast,.....roetsjjj.... into the trees.



Eekhoorn met je lange staartje

Herman Broekhuizen

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Eek - hoorn, eek - hoorn met je lan - ge staart - je, eek - hoorn, eek - hoorn

spring maar met een vaart - je, tik - ke tak - ke to - men, roetsj! in de bo - men.

G D A⁷ D

Reminders in composing songs for independent singing for children aged two to fours.

1. Music:

- Interesting melody and rhythm.
- Combination with chanting
- Amplitude: d1 – b1.
- Time signature: binary or ternary.
Matching the activity or subject/theme.
- Form.
Breathing at a natural way. Short sentences. Logical short musical sentences.
- Repeat of sentences or part of sentences.
- Accent on the right moments according to accents in the language
- Sound play connects with the text. Major and minor keys. (use other keys)
- No modulations
- Melodic and rhythmic surprises

2. Language:

- Sound play, vocal play and variation if possible
- Chants and Rhymes
- Correct use of language, language connected to the world of the children, children like jokes or funny language.
- Short sentences (intellectual and breathing)
- Placing of the words (accent conform the language, upbeat, rhythm fitting the word rhythm.)
- No long notes on short words. Always one note for every syllable.
- Play with sounds. Not too many words.
- There are no verses; you may use variations in text and variations in play.
- Don't use too often 'and' of'
- Rhyme: at the end, the beginning

We also should keep in mind that songs should be linked at the development stages and ask for repetition. Each song is functional: you can do something with it.

Conclusion

The first steps in the education of the child's voice should be taken in the homes. The moments and places where parents sing with their children are important. Music courses for parents and children should provide song and play material suitable for use in day care routines. Early childhood music teachers have an important task in educating young parents (and grandparents) in playing and singing with their children. Singing together in a safe environment (home, nursery or kindergarten) with repertoire suitable for the age group is a first step in educating the next generation of singers. Singing is natural, and a basic human need.

Children need an environment in which they are allowed to sing (and sometimes they need silence too!). They also have a need of caregivers, parents, teachers who sing with them, every day of their lives. Singing is natural, but a voice needs time to grow and develop!

In early childhood and especially in Early Childhood Music teaching we have to link the songs and activities to the development of the whole child. We have to give children the opportunity to repeat the songs as often as possible. We also have to be aware that the capacities of children 'under four' to sing and play music games change rapidly day by day. We should have enough musical and pedagogical skills and knowledge to guide them and to introduce all the children into the fantastic world of singing and making music together.

Educating the voice of young children

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Margré van Gestel

Music pedagogue

E mail: v_gestel@hotmail.com

www.zingendoemaarmee.nl

E mail: info@zingendoemaarmee.nl

Margré van Gestel (1954) received a degree as a teacher in primary school (1976), a certificate *Orff Schulwerke* and *Gehrels music in primary schools* and a degree in *Early Childhood Music Education*. She gained a higher degree in *Music Education* from the Conservatory of Utrecht (Schoolmuziek, 1993 the Netherlands). She received also degrees as a *Physical Remedial Teacher*, *NLP practitioner* and *NLP Master*.

Since 1987 she has been a teacher of pre school music education courses for parent and child. As an early childhood music teacher trainer she has given courses, national and international presentations and workshops on the subject of early childhood music education for musicians, as well as for nurses in day-care centres.