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MI Kids. Kindergarten Ready.

To improve your child's speech, just sing!

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(Photo: Provided/Michigan State University Community Music School)

There's some serious business behind all the fun in the Michigan State University Community Music School's Early Childhood Music Education program.

Not only are children building music skills through activities that often involve such props as hula hoops and scarves, they're also developing their language abilities.

Cynthia Crump Taggart, a professor of music education at MSU who directs the Early Childhood Music Education program, said a growing body of research shows that music can help young children improve their speech.

"Music development flows into language development," she said, noting that music can help children distinguish sounds and understand language patterns.

For example, rhythm and cadence are components of both music and spoken language, and activities that stress those elements can help children discover how sounds are structured and progress.

Music can also aid understanding of language nuances, such as a speaker's change in tone, said Kathy Schubert, a speech pathologist with the Ingham County Intermediate School District who works with Early On® Michigan, a Michigan Department of Education program that aims to address developmental delays in children up to 3 years of age. Its sister program, Build Up Michigan, focuses on getting kids ages 3 to 5 ready for kindergarten.

Taggart said that while the exact biological reasons for the link between music and language are unclear, it's known that both are processed by some of the same parts of the brain. In addition, she said, it's believed that the connection is most powerful in early childhood, when minds are most malleable.

Striking a chord with kids

Whatever the science, it's clear that most children find participating in music simply fun, Schubert said.

She has observed how attentive kids are while sitting in a circle with adults and other children singing songs. And, she noted, engagement is the first step toward learning.

Structured musical activities can also help youngsters develop socially by interacting with other children, she said.

The Community Music School's Early Childhood Music Education program offers infant/toddler classes for children up to age 3 and preschool classes for kids 3 to 5. The 10-week semesters consist of weekly 45-minute sessions.

Most parents who enroll in the program are primarily concerned about enhancing their child's music aptitude and view language development largely as an added benefit, Taggart said.

However, the school and the Early On and Build Up programs have partnered to enroll up to 12 children with developmental delays each semester. The arrangement was created after Early On/Build Up specialists observed in other classroom settings how effective music-based activities were in helping build language skills, Schubert said.

Schubert or other Early On staffers also participate in the Early Childhood Music Education classes where the Early On families are enrolled.

"We are there to support all children and their families, not just Early On families," Schubert said. "I'm really adamant about its effectiveness. It's one of our best tools."

Taggart and Schubert said they have found that music class levels the playing field for all children. For example, Schubert said she has observed children who have Down syndrome become leaders in a class by quickly learning to imitate the teacher's actions during chants and songs. She said she's also seen children with speech delays utter their first words after participating in the classes.

The power of song

Taggart recalls talking with a mother whose daughter with autism spectrum disorder had been enrolled in the program as a preschooler and had gone on to become a high school honor student and a member of the all-state band and choir. The mother told Taggart that she attributed the girl's success to participation in the Early Childhood Music program at MSU.

"I know that what I do makes a difference, but it is always nice to have that confirmed," Taggart said.

Schubert notes that music is "not necessarily a magic wand" for every child. For example, those with sensory concerns might have a hard time with large classes involving lots of movement and sound.

However, she added, the power of song to hasten children's development is clear.

And, Schubert and Taggart note, structured programs are only one method. Parents can also engage musically with children at home.

"It can be something as simple as singing 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat' while holding your child's hands," Schubert said.

Taggart advises parents to play a variety of music in the home, not just pop and children's songs, but also such genres as jazz, world and classical.

"We know that the richer the vocabulary parents use, the better their children's verbal skills will be," she said. "The same thing is true musically."

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