

A Home Space for Montessori Music

By Phil Berman





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Supporting your child's education in the coronavirus era continues to daunt parents around the US and the world. Subjects like reading and math are familiar to most adults, but more specialized subjects like music can be highly intimidating, especially if parents never learned music themselves or haven't played in a long time.

Countless research studies have stressed the importance that early childhood music-making has on the developing body and brain. With no definitive end to the pandemic in sight, parents are stuck with two options to support their child's musical early childhood: hire a specialist online or teach music themselves. Online video music lessons are a great solution for older children and adult learners who are learning instruments. Young children, however, thrive in environments where they can explore, improvise, and concentrate with hands-on music play.

At Rock and Roll Daycare in Cambridge, MA, we've spent the last seven years drawing from the Montessori philosophy and developing strategies to make music a fun and intuitive prepared music environment for young children and their caretakers.

Building Your Space

Over a century ago, Dr. Maria Montessori and her Casa dei Bambini (Children's House) sparked a worldwide educational revolution. Dr. Montessori observed that young children learn best when they are able to independently choose their activities in a prepared environment and interact with materials at their own pace. Inspired by this approach, we started to experiment with music materials in our Montessori-style preschool classrooms at Rock and Roll Daycare (ages 3-5).

First, you need a space. Find somewhere in your home to place a small shelf to display music materials. The space should be large enough for you and your child to sit on the floor across from each other. Find a place removed from high-traffic areas in your home where you and your child can play free from distraction. A rug and some pillows make for a comfortable environment.

Dr. Montessori believed that the right materials, beautiful, uncluttered, and simply displayed, would call to the child to engage with them on their own terms. In your home music area, resist the urge to overpopulate your space with materials. Depending on the size of your shelf, even 2-3 materials are more than enough to begin some serious music play as a family. If you have lots of instruments and materials, winnow your collection down to a few items, store the rest, and rotate new materials



in and out every few days as you observe your child's interests and playing habits. A few materials clearly displayed will capture your child's attention more than an overflowing bin of instruments.

Building Your Space

Hand Percussion

Hand percussion is the easiest way to make music with your child. Shakers, maracas, tambourines, rhythm sticks, jingle bells, and hand drums yield instant results. Sing and play yourselves or shake along to your favorite recordings. Sing your child's favorite songs but don't be afraid to introduce your children to the music you love. Your passion and excitement will be irresistible to your child who will want to dance, sing, and play along. Organize loose items like egg shakers or maracas in a basket or small box.



Ukuleles

Ukuleles are consistently one of the most popular instruments in our classrooms. Children love to sit, sing, and strum together with adults or all on their own. These are especially good if you play guitar and invite your child to play along with you. Younger children don't need to worry much about the fretboard and can enjoy strumming the ukulele like a percussion instrument. As children get older and develop finer motor skills, you can encourage experimentation and exploration on the fretboard and listening to changes in sound.



If you're buying a ukulele for the first time, I highly recommend purchasing a clip-on digital tuner to help you keep the instrument in tune and sounding great for your child. I also recommend installing a wall hanger for the instrument so children can take responsibility for keeping it up and out of harm's way.

Building Your Space



Listening Stations

Sometimes there's nothing better than slipping on a pair of headphones and listening to your favorite tunes. Volume-capped children's headphones make a great accessory to your music center while keeping the sound at a safe level for young ears.

While streaming platforms have transformed and expanded music libraries, I prefer to feature a few favorite CDs with a CD player. Young children can't type to look up the music they want to listen to – CDs offer children a screen-free listening environment where they can have an intentional choice about what



they listen to. An audio splitter and an adult set of headphones make it easy to share in the listening together as a family.

Wind Instruments

Shared-mouthpiece sanitary concerns typically disqualify wind instruments from a shared daycare setting. In the home though, wind instruments like harmonicas, melodicas, recorders, and slide whistles make a strong addition to any music collection. Wind instruments help children control and strengthen their breathing muscles and explore differences in pitch and dynamics.



Building Your Space

Acoustic Voice Amplifiers

Young children are constantly developing new language skills and absorbing paralinguistic inflections and sounds from the people around them. Hearing their own voice more clearly will help them to explore and experiment with their vocal sound and maybe even singing. Inexpensive echo microphones and PVC pipes fashioned like an old telephone receiver provide immediate vocal feedback to your child's ears without using a single battery.



Rainbow Bells and Books

Musical melodies are inherently full of shapes and repeating patterns. A set of eight rainbow pat bells coupled with colored music notation puts the tools to trace melody shapes in children and parents' hands. We developed our Fiddlefox publications to develop musical "pre-reading" skills and strengthen hand-eye coordination. If you can match a colored note to the same colored bell, you can play music. Our Rainbow Songbook for Bells and Beginners is the perfect introductory guide to playing melodies in minutes, starting with only three bells and building up to a full set of eight by the end of the book. Once complete,

you and your child will be able to play through any of the songs in our World Heritage Songbook Collection. A basket of music books allows your child to actively choose the music they're practicing and playing that day.



Building Your Space



Playing for Fun

The intention of this setup is to make music accessible and available to children on their own time at their own discretion. The minute that practicing becomes a chore is the minute a child loses interest in music. Instead, observe how your child interacts with the materials. Ask the child if you can join them in their play (they may have very strong opinions about this.) If you notice your child hasn't touched an instrument in a while, go over and start playing for your own enjoyment.

Eventually, your child will be interested in what you're doing and want to join you. Finally, have fun while you're playing together and enjoy the quality time you're spending together as parent and child.



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