

Music Education for Tiny Tots to Ten-Year-Olds

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The benefits of music education for children with normal hearing have been well researched and documented. The research reflects positive outcomes in habits of mind and behavior that range from self-discipline, self-expression and perseverance to problem solving, teamwork and empathy.

Music Enhances Speech and Language

The benefits of music education for children who are deaf or have hearing loss has come to the forefront during the last decade, posing a strong argument for the importance of including music education in these children's lives. As we have seen from recently published articles, there is growing evidence on the associations between participation in more musical activities and improved speech perception and language skills, including pitch perception and better perception of speech stress, word finding and verbal intelligence (Looi et al., 2019). In fact, in a study by Hidalgo et al., 2019, researchers found correlations between rhythmic training and a positive impact on these children's ability to change timing during conversations.

Based on this research, the Foundation for Hearing and Speech Rehabilitation (FHSR), a private foundation founded in 1956 in Chicago, launched our Music To My Ears (MTME) program in 2019 to bring the lifelong benefits and joy of music education to children who are deaf or have hearing loss. FHSR is a grassroots nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of children living with hearing loss by removing barriers that might prevent a child from achieving his or her full potential.

Music Education Can Begin in Infancy

Comprising three current age and school year-based pillars, the MTME programs meet the musical needs of each child at his or her specific age and stage. From infancy through age 4, the Music Enrichment pillar provides a year of tuition-free music classes for the child and caregiver. During the next stage—ages 5 and older—the Instruments pillar provides tuition-free private and group lessons for percussion and string instrument instruction. For school-aged children, the MTME school-based program provides high-quality music education to children who are deaf or have hearing loss, either embedded in the curriculum or as an after-school program. To round out the music discipline, the foundation is looking to launch a pilot program for music therapy geared specifically toward children ages 5-10 in early 2023.

Songs Make a Child's Heart Sing

Because these children face many challenges in their lives, such as social integration, literacy markers, quality-of-life and communication struggles, having a music education from infancy will help to mitigate some of those very challenges. So how exactly does including a music education benefit children who are deaf or have hearing loss?

Participation in early childhood music programming works first and foremost by facilitating a musically rich home environment. While the music appreciation classes provide



socialization, which is crucial for all families, they also provide a tool set for primary caregivers in continuing music at home. The classes focus on repetition, rhythmic sounds and linking sound to movement to stimulate the child's vestibular system and encourage sound articulation with a call-and-response methodology. All babies want to mimic their favorite person's expressions and vocalizations, and music provides this opportunity in a lovingly natural way that combines with the child's speech therapy to assist with vocalization and language production.

Music Is Instrumental for Auditory Processing

Instrument lessons take music education to the next level. A percussive instrument, such as a drum or piano, provides physical feedback that is accessible to children with all levels of hearing loss. Beethoven produced his greatest work, Symphony No. 9, when he was completely deaf. The key benefit of music training is that it is thought to help children who are deaf or have hearing loss with auditory processing by assisting with auditory attention, perception and processes, including cognitive and linguistic capabilities (Rochette et al., 2014). All skill sets that directly help with listening and spoken language skills work in tandem to decrease language delays and increase literacy.

Songs Amplify Language and Literacy

School-based music programs, such as the ones we have created, focus on strong repetition of songs that support language development for children who are deaf or have hearing loss. This curriculum includes songs that feature call-and-response to mimic taking turns in conversations, lyrics that rise and fall to encourage sentence formation and better detection of rhythmic word regularity in conversation. It all leads to assisting with speech perception, patterns and language production, enabling children to fully participate in all aspects of life.

Through the MTME programs, the foundation is committed to amplifying language and literacy outcomes for children who are deaf or have hearing loss in a joyful, engaging way that supports traditional speech and habilitation therapies.

As a mom of a child who was born deaf and received cochlear implants at the age of 6 months, I have a personal passion to give the gift of music to children just like my son. Our early childhood music enrichment classes are some of my fondest memories of his infancy, and I know that this in-depth exposure assisted him in his listening and language development. I am proud of the work we are doing at FHSR to bring this program to so many children. For additional information regarding this and our other programs, you may visit FHSR.org.

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Kristen J. Van Dyke, executive director of The Foundation for Hearing and Speech Rehabilitation (FHSR), first joined FHSR 13 years ago as a board director with a personal understanding of childhood hearing loss. Shortly after the birth of her son, Maxwell, she learned he was deaf. Since then, she has seen firsthand the benefits of cochlear implantation. In 2015, Kristen transitioned into the position of executive director. With a master's in public policy from the Harris School at the University of Chicago, Kristen brings both professional expertise and personal experience to her role. Driven by a keen focus on early childhood challenges that result from income and health disparities, she works to create programs that address all the needs of these children.

