

Authors' Notes: The Neuroscience of Teaching Good Behavior Through Musikgarten

Authors' Notes: Please teach my child to relax and be calm.

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Welcome to the 2nd issue of *Authors' Notes* from Musikgarten

Musikgarten's *Authors' Notes* deal with behaviors that are taught effectively through music.

Issue #1 explored the way music helps teach our children the skill of delayed gratification.

In this issue we will delve into another "hot topic" among parents of toddlers:

Teaching Children to Relax and Be Calm!

As a parent of a young child, you are constantly challenged with all of the things you want to teach him/her. We know that you, the parents, are the child's first and best teachers. We also know that children often imitate behaviors that are modeled for them.

But how many parents of babies and toddlers are usually relaxed and calm?

Toddlers are, by their very nature, sensory-motor explorers. Their "job" is to motor around their environment collecting impressions by way of their senses - by looking, listening, touching, smelling, and even tasting everything that is within their reach...as well as things that are slightly beyond their reach. This usually results in you having to remove everything that could possibly be a danger to your child- which is just about everything in your house! And since that is a virtually impossible task, particularly when life takes you outside of the controlled environment of your home, you probably spend most of your toddlers' waking hours heading off near-disasters. **This does not make for a very calm and relaxed behavior model for your child to match.**

We clearly understand that approaching things in a calm way is much more productive, and that a response made in a state of panic is rarely constructive. **So how can you possibly model these behaviors for your children, given the chaotic reality of daily life with a toddler?** Here are some examples of how relaxation and calmness are modeled within the context of your Musikgarten classes, along with tips on extending these ideas into your daily life.

Balance stimulating activities with quiet, restful ones when playing with your child.

Rocking is not only for getting your child to go to sleep! It can be a 2 or 3-minute respite in the midst of a whirlwind of activity, and it is a time-tested way to calm down. Just as we follow the bounce *La Raspa* with *Fee, Fie, Foe, Fum* and our dancing of *Don Gato* with *A la rorro nino*, take some time to sit and rock with your child while quietly singing something such as *Row, Row, Row Your Boat* in a slow tempo right in the middle of playtime! Whether your child likes to sit in your lap, sit across from you holding your hands, or sit next to you while you rock, you are modeling a self-calming technique. Neuroscience Educator, Dr. Dee Coulter, explains:

Self-calming is a skill we will use our whole lives to help regulate our behavior. But we aren't born with a calming switch! We first learn to be calm by being calmed - in other words, we must coach our children, by staying relaxed, using a soft voice, and keeping a warm heart. Even if your child responds with tears and distress for a while, be patient. This technique will work its magic in time.

Rocking a child only to get him/her to sleep can sometimes send a negative message to a child who resists sleep. But by incorporating it into times that are filled with loving positive feelings for your child, s/he may try it when next faced with a potentially stressful situation. When you "graduate" to *The Cycle of Seasons*, you will see this trend continue with a rocking piece following an active song, such as "What Can We Do on a Nice Fall Day?"

Make sure you build in enough time when doing things with other children to eliminate the anxiety children sometimes have when they think they may not get a turn.

Your Musikgarten class is a hands-on experience- each child receives an instrument, a scarf, a turn to echo a pattern. This gives your child security that s/he will soon have a turn, this security enables him/her to relax. At home and other places when you must first show your little one something before allowing action, acknowledge that it is difficult to wait, but promise that the child's turn will come in just one minute. Once your child is secure with this pattern of events, s/he will become less anxious about the possibility of not getting a turn. Remember: young children are sensory-motor explorers who learn by doing; as such, this is the only reasonable way to engage them.

In your next Musikgarten level, *The Cycle of Seasons*, learning to be calm and relaxed is further reinforced through storytelling, instrument playing, movement and listening activities.

- Both the act of storytelling and the story repertoire support the idea. The fact that we are telling stories, rather than reading a book with a foregone conclusion allows for the children to have input, and although it is typical for 3-year-olds to blurt out whatever pops into their minds, they learn over time that they have to wait for their turn in order to be heard.
- In the story repertoire we hear about how a scared cat is attracted to the quiet, relaxed child, as opposed to the other noisy, active, people in the room who are trying to help.
- We challenge the children to wait until they hear the wind blowing before beginning to move in "The North Wind Doth Blow", and during our focused listening activities we spend a great deal of time establishing a "listening posture" - meaning that we take time to settle our bodies so that we are relaxed and quiet to allow for uninterrupted absorption of the sound source - before ever turning on the CD.

At home, try making more of a ritual of story time or the listening games played with the cards and CD.

Establish a special listening corner in your home, and don't forget to model the conscious quieting of your body and mind before beginning the game.

Encourage the art of conversation.

The ability to sustain a meaningful conversation is a fundamental skill, but it is one that we rarely think of when listing the tools our children will need to succeed as they grow up. Not only do we not allow time to develop this essential skill, we spend a great deal of time telling our children to keep quiet! Add to that the fact that rather than having meaningful dinner conversation, we are often grabbing a quick bite in the car on the way to soccer practice, and it is no wonder that the ability to converse is quickly disappearing.

In order to have a meaningful conversation, one has to not only wait for his turn to speak, one has to relax enough to be able to hear and consider his counterpart's point of view, and then formulate his own thoughts before beginning to speak. **It is the ultimate challenge!** In Musikgarten classes, we nurture conversation in many ways. Echoing patterns, a part of every class, is vital to your child's musical development. However, this ritual also nurtures your child's ability to converse - to wait, to relax, to listen, to think, and to respond. In toddler class, the activity is rudimentary, but very attractive to most toddlers. As the child graduates into *The Cycle of Seasons* class and beyond, the activity grows in its complexity. And as the complexity grows, so does the necessity to relax, be calm, and listen in order to give an appropriate response.

Music is a wonderful tool for teaching children to relax and be calm, and Musikgarten classes capitalize on this with their:

- balance of stimulating and quiet, calming activities,
- stories which call for meaningful input from every child,
- structured listening activities requiring that we calm our bodies and minds to facilitate conscious hearing,
- and activities which nurture the art of conversing.

And since Musikgarten class is a comfortable, safe and fun experience which is enjoyed by parents and children together - there is an emotional attachment which actually deepens the learning, allowing children to carry their new-found behaviors of being calm and relaxed into other areas of their lives.

A partial bibliography

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