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What is This?
Parents’ Viewpoints Concerning the Value of Preschool Summer Camps

Carol McDowell

Using data from a parent survey, the author examined factors that influenced parents to enroll their children in a 5-day summer music camp. Survey questions included (a) What were the determining factors for enrolling your child in the class? (b) What activities did your child enjoy/value the most? (c) What musical activities do you and your child participate in at home? and (d) What activities did the parent participate in at home or while in school? Learning new music activities to share together, developing skills to help their children in day care, and having fun sharing music were the top reasons cited. Musical implications of early childhood teacher training and previous parent involvement are discussed.

Keywords: early childhood; education; preschool; music; instruction

The preschool years are an important period of learning in a child’s life. From birth through age 5, growth and learning progress more rapidly than any other time of life (Nye, 1983, p. 3). Young children are eager to hear, see, taste, touch, and smell things all around them. As this is the prime age for learning, what better time to involve children in music?

Limited music education opportunities exist in the United States for children prior to kindergarten, even for those who attend preschool (Goodman & McClung-Guillory, 2003). Group lessons that facilitate musical interaction between parents and children are available on a limited basis in most parts of the country. Such programs include Kindermusik, Musikgarten, and Music for Children, among others.

Who teaches early childhood music? Parents are a child’s first teachers, but because the number of families wherein both parents work outside the home is increasing (especially for families with children younger than 3), the responsibility of teaching music rests with child care staff (Scarr, 1998). Child care environments range from well-staffed centers to private homes where group babysitting occurs (Kenney, 1989). Although music activities are strongly recommended by experts who regulate child care facilities, many of the staff lack the musical training and resources needed to deliver instruction. Some may not sing very well, read music, or play an instrument. Even teachers who do have music training may feel better prepared to perform than to teach (Hildebrandt, 1998). In 2001, de l’Etoile developed an in-service music-training program for child care personnel working with infants and toddlers and found that when caregivers received this training, the children in their care demonstrated increases in visual, vocal, and physical engagement behaviors.

Because most instruments are sized for bigger bodies, most children usually are not ready to begin formal music lessons until age 5 or 6 (Martin, 1999), which leaves the responsibility of fostering music in the hands of preschool and day care teachers and parents. How do music educators train, advise, and counsel early child care providers and parents? What kind of setting will best fit the child’s musical learning? How much detail about music can or should we expect the prekindergarten child to accommodate at each stage of development (Andress, 1989)? With the rapid growth of Head Start programs, latchkey programs in public schools, and the demand for high-quality preschools and day cares, the music education profession must develop methods to serve the young child (Scott, 1989). Including early childhood teaching experiences as part of music and elementary teacher training programs at colleges and universities could reinforce the importance of early music experiences on future music educators.

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Kindermusik is an early childhood music and movement program for children (age birth to 7 years) and their families. Its philosophy is grounded in the beliefs that “(a) every child is musical, (b) every parent is the child’s most important teacher, (c) the home is the most important place for learning to take root and grow, and (d) music nurtures a child’s cognitive, emotional, social, language, and physical development” (Kindermusik, n.d.). The curricula incorporate the latest early childhood research: Experts are consulted from the fields of child psychology, literacy and language development, multicultural music, and special needs. Teachers must go through a specialized training program in order to obtain a Kindermusik teaching license (see Kindermusik Business Basics, 2003; Kindermusik Business Manual, 1999).

The Survey

I was interested in determining the value of a summer Kindermusik camp to the parents of participants. Using information from a parent survey, I examined factors that influenced parents to enroll their children in a 5-day summer music camp that was sponsored by the local arts council. Among other questions, parents were asked, (a) What were the determining factors for enrolling your child in the class? (b) What activities did your child enjoy/value the most? (c) What musical activities do you and your child participate in at home? and (d) What musical activities did you [the parents] participate in at home or while you were in school?

Parents were given the survey during the first 2 days of camp and anonymously returned their answers to a box placed on the exhibit table. Although 28 students participated in the three music camps, some parents had children enrolled in more than one class. Not all parents returned their surveys, which resulted in 16 completed surveys.

Responses

Survey answers revealed that parents enrolled their children to learn about new music activities to share together, to to help their children develop skills that will be useful in day care in day care, and to have fun sharing music. Each question is discussed below.

How did you hear about the Kindermusik summer camps?

Most of the parents had heard about the summer camps through friends, newspapers, and flyers. Some parents had children who attended previous camps, 1 parent had telephoned the arts council, and another had seen the camp advertised on the Chamber of Commerce Web site.

What class(es) did your children participate in?

Has your child participated in previous Kindermusik summer camps, Kindermusik classes, or other early childhood music programs?

Thirteen parents had children enrolled in the 1½- to 3-year-old class, and 5 parents had children enrolled in the 4- to 7-year-old class. Half the parents (8) had enrolled their children in previous Kindermusik camps, Kindermusik classes, or early childhood music programs.

What were your expectations for this class?

“Playing instruments, singing, dancing, and listening” were activities expected by 4 parents. Other answers given were “fun interaction with others, music enjoyment and an introduction to music, a continuation of last year, as well as a ‘different experience.’” Some parents expected “to have age-appropriate music instruction from a qualified teacher; my child would have a safe, fun, interesting learning experience involving music and art; to help my child enjoy music and rhythm, group participation, listening skills, and creativity through arts and crafts activities.” One parent wrote, “I didn’t know what to expect, but I hoped it would keep my two-year-old’s attention.” Still another wrote that “last year’s class greatly exceeded our expectations—we knew it would be just as great.”

How important were the following factors in your decision to enroll your child in this class?

When asked for their top reasons for enrolling their children in the summer music camps, “reputation of the instructor” and “developing new music activities to share together” were the most popular answers (see Table 1).

What activities did your child enjoy/value the most?

Playing instruments was the most enjoyable-valued camp activity, as cited by 14 parents. Stories with sound effects, dancing/movement, and singing each received four responses, and “finger plays” received two responses. One parent responded that “the enjoyment of different activities wasn’t the same for her 20-month-old and her 4-year-old, but they both enjoyed all aspects of their respective programs.” Another wrote that her daughter looked forward to the snacks every day.
How do you feel these activities/values will influence your child in day care/preschool or when they attend school?

Responses to this question included helping adjust to preschool, neurological development, and helping with music and rhythms. Others wrote,

- “Any interaction with other children previous to attending school is valuable in preparing them—rhythm activities, listening, and movement are all important in the skill of learning to read.”
- “Great for group interaction and listening—she is learning to follow directions from a teacher!”
- “Stimulate learning and fine/gross motor skills.”
- “Circle time will help him when he starts day care. It showed he can hold his attention for short times.”
- “It helped my child because he is shy and it was good [for him].”
- “Will benefit [my] child in learning listening skills and working with other children.”
- “I think being around other children and doing activities with them will help him with other children at day care.”

What musical activities do you and your child participate in at home?

Listening to music (radio, recordings, sing-along videos) was rated the number one at-home musical activity of parents and children. Additional responses are listed in Table 2.

Did you [parent] participate in musical activities at home? If so, which ones?

Thirteen parents had participated in musical activities at home or while they were in school. These activities included singing in choirs; playing in bands; and taking private lessons, including piano, voice, flute, saxophone, and drums. Participation in a military band and musical theatre were also listed. Eleven people gave more than one answer to this question.

Was adequate information provided about the Kindermusik summer camp program through brochures and/or demonstrations? Why or why not?

Fourteen parents said that there was adequate information provided for the summer camp program through brochures and demonstrations. One wrote that a friend came last year and told her about the program—she was not aware of any brochure. Another said that the information was excellent, detailed, and specific.

Would you enroll your child in future Kindermusik or other early childhood music programs? Why or why not?

All 16 parents wrote that they would enroll their children in future Kindermusik or other early childhood music programs. Comments included,
• “It is fun for both of us and a great opportunity for learning.”
• “My son enjoyed this program so much. He is high energy and it kept him moving.”
• “I think music is good for children.”
• “[I] would like to have [my] child in a music program.”

Two parents wrote that they would absolutely enroll in future classes because it’s a “fun, nonthreatening environment for our daughter to become familiar with such a variety of things” and because of “the music and non-music benefits.”

**Discussion**

The old adage that the best advertisement is word of mouth held true for this summer program, as most of the parents had heard about the summer music camps from other people. Half of the parents (8) had their children participate in previous Kindermusik summer camps or other early childhood music programs. Although 3 parents had no expectations for the camp, the others expected a safe, fun, different, enjoyable, age-appropriate experience for their children from qualified teachers. Group participation, increased listening skills, and increased creativity were also mentioned as expectations for the camp.

The reputation of the instructor was the leading factor parents considered when enrolling their children in a summer music camp. Parents ranked cost and time of the class in the middle of the determining factors for enrollment. The classes met either midmorning or early afternoon. The cost ranged from $68 to $92, which included at-home materials packages.

Playing instruments was the number one activity enjoyed by children. Children could identify the shape, size, and sound of some classroom instruments by examining the instruments in great detail. Stories with instruments, singing, and dancing/movement all tied for second place on the list of most enjoyable activities. Moving to music—crawling, rolling, tumbling, walking, skipping, and jumping—was also a popular activity.

Ten parents listed benefits that the music camps provided for their children; interestingly, nine of the benefits listed were nonmusical. Four parents listed interaction as a benefit, 3 listed listening skills, and 2 listed help with reading and holding attention. Only 1 parent listed help with music and rhythm as a benefit.

Early childhood music fosters learning and growth in all areas of child development; prepares children for future learning environments; enhances self-esteem, self-control, attention, and socialization skills; and creates opportunities for parents and children to spend time together.

Singing was the top musical activity that parents had enjoyed as children, so perhaps this love of singing is being passed on to their children. Too often mothers do not sing to children because it is not a natural response for them or they may have been discouraged to sing sometime in life (Szabo, 1999). The child who is read to is more likely to become a reader, and the same principal holds true for the child who is sung to.

Custodero and Johnson-Green (2003) found that musically experienced parents were more likely to play music and sing to their infants. These parents, who “reported having had positive experiences with school music instruction, including orchestra, band, and choir, have continued their music-making as adults, encouraged music-making in their families, and provided their children with music-education opportunities similar to their own” (Custodero & Johnson-Green, 2003, p. 106). The parents who participated in this survey were involved in musical activities at home and school when they were children, and they are passing their enjoyment of music on to their children.

Taylor (1995) states that a child’s reception or refusal of music can depend on the child’s age, past musical experience, cultural awareness, and attitude within the home. Children whose parents appreciate music and have musical talent are privileged because parents share things they enjoy (p. 194). Such was the case for these summer campers. General music teachers and music education students can use their interactions with parents of young children to stress the importance of making and listening to music in the home, singing to children, and enrolling children in organized preschool music programs. The promotion of local programs by established and future educators has an enormous impact on involved and conscientious parents.

In some parts of our country, musical opportunities increase only marginally for kindergarten students because most schools do not have music specialists, and many classroom teachers do not feel confident enough or possess enough knowledge to lead students in musical activities or teach basic musical concepts (Goodman & McClung-Guillory, 2003). Again, music educators must seek answers to these issues.

One solution might include partnering with community groups for summer music classes. Music teachers will need to know what summer activities are available for young children in their communities and publish their program dates in early spring. Educators may offer their classes at various places, such as religious institutions,
dance studios, music stores, senior and recreation centers, or colleges and universities. Religious institutions may have their own child care centers, but if they do not, they often have space that sits empty during the week. Dance studios are often unused during the mornings, and music stores bring children closer to instruments and instruction. Whatever location is chosen, it should be convenient for parents; have accessible parking; and include a waiting area for parents, easy access to restrooms, and a large, open space for movement activities.

Musical activities (singing, moving, playing instruments) are a valuable tool in early childhood education and can play a part in helping children master extramural skills as well. Music is something children will not grow out of; rather, it is something they will grow into and something that will last throughout their lives.

References