
MUSIC NOTES: MUSIC DEVELOPMENT OUTSIDE OF USING WORDS

by H. Ellie Wolfe
Assistant Professor of Music Education, Drake University
Early Childhood Chair, Iowa Music Educators Association
Secretary, Early Childhood Music & Movement Association
ellie.wolfe@drake.edu

I love words and languages. There is so much to learn and explore and communicate through words, so I find myself continually working on my ability to think, read, write, listen, and speak through words—and not only in English. Still, sometimes words fail me. They aren't always enough.

As in other areas, words are not always enough to support music learning. It is very true that we can develop musically when we build skills to use words to share our understanding of what we hear. Likewise, someone might use word-based prompts to help us branch out in our music making or refine it. But to fully support musical development, there are many ways to prompt, understand, and communicate about music outside of using words. In this column, I will share a few that have worked really well for my own musical development and for supporting the musical development of young children.

When we help children build a vocabulary, we help them develop tools to create a wider range of ideas and ideas that are more complex, in addition to building their ability to communicate. Building what I like to refer to as a *sound vocabulary* (vocabulary of sounds you can make) can serve a similar purpose for music making and thinking. And when considering helping children build a sound vocabulary, we can also hone in specifically on vocalizations, or sounds you make with your mouth and voice.

First, we can attune ourselves to the sounds that a child is already vocalizing, and we can return these sounds to the child. Returning the babbling of an infant can feel natural, inviting, and rewarding. They might say “babababa” and I respond with the same “babababa.” And if an infant blows raspberries, I might blow raspberries back. This sort of sound mirroring can continue as children grow older. If a four-year-old narrates what they are doing in a sing-song way—“I’m washing my hands. Pump, pump for soap”—then I might return their words in the same sing-song voice. And I remember fondly when a frustrated kindergartener exhaled with a sigh that turned into humming on a single pitch, and I offered a mirror of the sigh and hum.

Offering a mirror of a sound helps children make conscious note of the sounds they can create; offering a funhouse mirror of a sound can help them build their sound vocabulary further. There are so many ways to slightly alter a vocalization. The infant's "babababa" might be retuned louder or quieter, slower or faster, with pauses, or a different pattern of pitches. For instance, if the child offered "babababa" mostly on one pitch, I might return it with the pitch going up at the end like a question. After the kindergartener and I returned a sigh and hum a few times, I clipped the end of the hum with a hard consonant. Likewise, I could have slowly faded to silence. We ended up having a sort of conversation with percussive hums.

Another way to build a sound vocabulary and play with vocalization is to try to use your voice and mouth to recreate approximations of sounds made by objects. If a cabinet creaks when you open it, try to mimic that sound and encourage children to do the same. I remember watching a child in a mixed-age classroom for three- to six-year-olds. She had a spray bottle and a squeegee at the windowed door that went to the outside playground. Squirt, squirt, squirt went the bottle, then the girl did her best to make the same squirt, squirt, squirt sound with her voice. Repeatedly. For about 10 minutes. While she made that window incredibly clean, she was working on her sound vocabulary.

The possibilities for making sounds are incredibly numerous, and inspiration is everywhere. By engaging with these sounds intentionally and through nearly exact or purposefully approximate imitation, children can build their sound vocabulary. Though it sounds sometimes like noise, this is an important form of musical development.