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How to choose a music class for your child

The following guidelines can be used to help choose an appropriate music class for your child. These guidelines are aimed mainly at preschool and primary aged children.

Established music groups

There are a significant number of established music groups with relatively well know names. There is now quite an industry in providing music classes for preschool children. The vast majority are franchises and in the majority of cases no musical skills or musical knowledge is required. Most are run as businesses and have good marketing techniques. In order to find out what is behind a particular organisation you can go to the respective website and click on "business opportunity" or "franchise opportunity". If it tells you that there is no need to be musically trained to run this sort of franchise it will give you an indication of the minimum quality required. In most cases the requirement is to have a good singing voice and to be enthusiastic.

There are three main disciplines that were developed during the twentieth century (Kodaly, Dalcroze and Orff). These approaches were developed to improve music education and go from babies to conservatoire level. Details can be found by doing a Google search. Be aware that there is no regulation regarding the use of these names, so a teacher or organisation that claims to use "Kodaly" may only include a tiny amount of this approach and not be fully aware of the underlying philosophy.

Suitable songs for children

The muscles that operate the vocal chords in young children are not developed and as such do not have the strength to produce a wide range of notes. Just as a five year old will be unable to run 100 metres in 12 seconds (the leg muscles are not developed) so they will be unable to sing a song

where the range of notes from top to bottom is more than a few notes. Trying to get children to sing a song with a range of 8 notes (an octave) is an impossible task for a small child. Such songs as Hickory Dickory Dock (8 notes) and Humpty Dumpty (13 notes) are outside the normal singing range of most youngsters. Also, these songs can be technically complicated. For example the last line of Hickory Dickory Dock is very busy with fast moving notes that children will not be able to sing accurately. Using lots of these songs will result in young children singing the wrong notes or singing out of tune, which in turn trains the musical mind to be off key. It is OK for adults to sing these songs for children to listen to, but if you find a music group that uses these songs continually then you will know that the basics of singing in tune is something that has not been addressed.

Songs that children can sing

There is a natural phenomenon that two particular notes are attractive to the human mind. These are the fifth and third degree of the major scale (so and mi) or sometimes called the falling minor third. This is easily identified as the chanting sound that all children will make. As a result of this there are simple two or three note songs in every culture in the world. "Rain Rain Go Away" is an obvious example from English culture. By using simple songs with these notes young children can become successful and sing in tune. If you find a music group that does not have this sound being used in relatively large measures then you will know that this group has not got to grips with the basic underlying concept of getting children to sing in tune.

Accompaniment to songs

The easiest music for young children to take on board is the unaccompanied human voice. The sound of a simple song with just a couple of notes can be taken in and aurally understood by small children. As soon as a piano, guitar or some form of pre-recorded music is added then the whole exercise becomes to aurally too complicated for the young child. Adults might find this approach attractive but the reality is that young children are unable to take on board the complicated structure of the music. If you find a music group where unaccompanied singing of simple songs that contain just a few notes is not a main activity then you can be pretty sure that such a group has not got to grips with the basics of teaching quality music to young children.

Unconscious learning

All humans learn unconsciously initially. The further below the age of five then the more unconscious and powerful is the learning. This is the way that

we all learn language. We begin by hearing it (in the womb), and then by starting to understand. We then start to copy the odd word and soon end up stringing together proper sentences. By the time a child is four or five years old they are using verbs, adjectives, nouns, pronouns and all the basic ingredients of language, but it is not until then that we start to show them how things are written down. The same applies to learning music. Unless the correct basic ingredients are carefully put in then they can't be extracted and used later for teaching basic musical skills. If you speak to a teacher and they are not able to tell you in some detail why a particular song or routine is used then you will know that this music session is perhaps not focussed on quality music education. It might not be so good to have an ongoing commentary regarding the educational content of the songs throughout a music session but if the teacher is not aware in some detail of the underlying educational value of the material used, then there will almost certainly be a "hit and miss" approach at best to the quality of the learning.

Singing in Parts

One of the most important ways to improve tuning is to sing in two or more parts. This is too difficult for most preschool children, but if the parents are included in the session the use of singing simple songs in canon can be an excellent way of improving the quality of the parents singing and in turn will improve the musical quality of the class for the children. It is likely that only the more focused of musical groups will do songs in canon and use this technique to good effect. If you find a music group that includes this sort of activity and does it well you will have found a group that is more likely to be providing some quality work. If you find a group where some parents are not required (or perhaps "encouraged") to sing at all then it is less likely that the quality of the music for the children will be so good.

Please note that most music organisations offer a "fun music session" or "music and movement". Some organisation claim in a rather broad way to be "educational" and some make much of the social aspect of things. Music classes are sometimes used for other things including getting parents to be interactive with their children, or as a way of parents meeting each other socially. If you are looking for some general music/social event then most preschool music groups will provide what you are looking for. If you are looking for a music group that provides some depth and leads to quality learning and perhaps music literacy then the content of this document should help you to make a more informed choice.

If we can be of further help or you would like to ask any specific questions please feel free to contact us.