



5. Music Talk: How Music Promotes Conversation

Hi, Amy McConkey Robbins here and we want to talk about how music promotes conversation. Chris Barton and I often say that “music is invitational while language is confrontational.” By that we mean that music is structured in such a way that is inclusive and allows for participation at a level that matches an individual’s comfort and skill set. For example, during the seventh inning stretch, people sing “Take me out to the Ball Game.” Some sing earnestly, others timidly, some know all the words, some just a few, some may just tap their toes or join in only for the “And it’s one, two, three strikes you’re out” part. It’s possible to be a participant in many ways. In contrast, spoken conversation demands a response. If I ask you a direct question, you are compelled to respond or you will be thought of as rude or pragmatically-impaired.

Music, by its nature, offers repetition and over learning, reinforcing anticipatory comprehension, also known as prediction. For example, if I sing: shave and a haircut

I think all of you knew what came next, and some of you even sang it! Even though you probably were never directly TAUGHT the correct response, you learned it because the rules of musical convention in a culture are acquired through listening to music over and over. Think about that: It’s similar to the way hearing children learn the language of their parents by listening again and again and participating as they are able. Children’s songs provide a context that supports the ability to predict what comes next. And to fill in missing pieces of the auditory signal by demonstrating **auditory closure**.

“Twinkle, twinkle little _____ How I wonder what you _____.” Pairing hand motions with a song allows children to participate in the routine even before they are able to speak. Hand motions also provide a way for babies and toddlers to request their favorite songs, by doing the motions.

Echo songs or call-and-response songs set up the convention for musical conversation and turn taking. I sing, then you sing, or I play then you play. For young children, I might use a play microphone as a prompt to emphasize whose turn it is. Here again we find the corollary in spoken conversation is about taking turns, and sharing the stage, so that it doesn’t become one sided. Because a monologue is NOT conversation!

One way music can facilitate the time spent in the limelight is through rhythmic parameters. For example, each child takes turns playing 4 or 8 beats. We're having a dialogue!

Or alternate singing lines of a familiar song. I sing the first line, you sing the next and so on.

These kinds of music experiences help to introduce and support the idea that conversation is a two-way street. That's a fundamental notion to establish with children, and music helps us do that.

Until next time:

Do Music. REAL Music. Every day!