

Planning music sessions

It is important to consider the musical aspects of a group session regardless of your aim. For example, your music session may be themed around counting and number songs. The focus may perhaps be on the content as opposed to *how* the content is incorporated and how this will be delivered *musically*.

Taking a little time to consider how you may sing, which starting note to use, and singing with enthusiasm can make a huge difference to the quality of the *musical* experience for the children.

Here are some suggestions for running group music sessions:

- Have plenty of enthusiasm, energy and patience when leading music sessions.
- Non-verbal communication is extremely important, it isn't necessary to incorporate a large amount of verbal language in sessions. Modelling activity can be a far more powerful way of communicating rather than explaining verbally to children. Have a go at simply *doing* rather than explaining and observe how the children engage. Consider how much musical content there is versus spoken language within your music sessions.
- Try to make eye contact with all children so that everyone feels included.
- Encourage children to contribute their ideas within the session so that they are heard and valued.
- If a child is reluctant to join in despite encouragement, don't worry. Children are often considered not be joining in when they are not evidently singing or playing instruments. You will often see and hear these children later singing the songs from the session. Remember that listening ***is*** actively participating; we just can't always see it.
- If you encourage children to sing loudly they will often shout which will not be good for their voices or their singing development. Remember that children are in the early days of using their voices and their voices are developing, having the ability to control the volume of their singing voice can be tricky. You can encourage children to use their best singing voices rather than their loud singing voices.
- Songs and rhymes can really come alive with the imaginative use of props such as puppets.
- Children learn through repetition. Don't be afraid to sing a song over and over again. Remember you can vary it by e.g. changing the volume (dynamics), speed (tempo) or by involving instruments.

- Be flexible, children often ask if they can sing their favourite songs – be prepared to include them in your sessions. If children know these songs well then you can incorporate another activity to accompany the singing, e.g. move whilst singing, use instruments to accompany the songs.
- Plan for differentiation to nurture the individual development of children, e.g. if you have a session involving 2 to 4-year olds, can you offer ideas for differentiation within the activity to enable the different age groups to participate in different ways?
- Social props such as parachutes, large scrunches and lycra can be a great way of encouraging children to participate as a group.
- Flow – carefully consider the flow of the session and the range of content that you will include. Perhaps a mixture of singing, movement, use of instruments, and a listening activity could offer a broad range of musical experiences. This does not mean however that you have to include masses of content in each session. Less is more and as stated above repetition is important. For example, one song could be sung for the group to listen to, for the children to then join in with and you could then sing the same song using different dynamics or tempo.

The use of recorded music in sessions

If you are going to use recorded music in sessions carefully consider what music you will use, how you use it and your aim. If you are using recorded songs to sing along with, you have no control over the speed of the song, no room to pause and if the volume is loud, you may struggle to hear the children singing. If your aim is for children to sing, then it is more appropriate to sing songs yourself so that you are in control of the speed; volume; you have the ability to include pauses; and you are more likely to hear the children singing.

This isn't to suggest that recorded songs should not be used, it is *how* they are used that is important. Listening to recorded songs can be a hugely beneficial musical experience as well as listening to instrumental recorded music. If you are incorporating the use of recorded instrumental music in group sessions also consider how this will be used, e.g. moving in response to the music, playing instruments with the music, listening and discussing the music.

Singing songs

Many people are not confident when it comes to singing, if this is the case and you need to run group music sessions, then the entire content of the session does not have to revolve around singing. Musical games, movement activities and listening activities can be incorporated.

Perhaps focus on practising 2 or 3 songs and singing them well rather than including a range of songs that you are not confident to sing. These 2 or 3 songs can be a useful base of songs to draw upon. You can create new verses to songs, good melodies for this are 'Here we go round the Mulberry Bush', 'London's Burning', 'The farmer's in his den'. Encourage other members of staff to join in. When encouraging children to sing and teaching children songs, one does not necessarily have to be a trained singer but there are points to consider.

Head voice, chest voice

Singers often use the terms 'head voice' and 'chest voice' to describe the physical sensations of sound produced while singing. The chest voice is where our speaking voice is located. This can be very useful:

Place your hand on your chest and sing the first note of *Twinkle Twinkle*, if you can feel your voice resonating in your chest then you are using your 'chest voice' which is fairly low. Try to raise the pitch of the note so that you are not using your chest voice, this is what we can describe as a 'head' voice. This may feel a bit strange to start with as it is not where we normally use our voice for speaking. If you think about the sound coming from around your eyes this can help - smiling conveys enjoyment but also raises the voice up. When singing with young children we should be using our head voices as children's voices are higher than adults.

Another tip for singing using a suitable pitch with children is to listen to children carefully and join in with them at the pitch they are using.

Two very valuable books were published in 2018, both of which offer guidance, suggestions and reflections to support planning:

- Greenhalgh, Z. (2018). *Music and Singing in the Early Years, A Guide to Singing with Young Children*. Abingdon Oxon: Routledge.

Chapter 5, 'Planning and evaluation', (pp. 53-68) offers guidance and support with regards to aims and objectives, physical environment, sample lesson plans and reflective evaluation.

- Huhtinen-Hildén, L. and Pitt, J. (2018). *Taking a Learner-Centred Approach to Music Education, Pedagogical Pathways*. Abingdon Oxon: Routledge.

Chapter 5, 'Planning-Preparing for navigation and negotiation of music learning', (pp.54-68), includes themes such as 'Thinking about the learning situation', 'Preparing pathways for learning', 'Physical and practical scaffolds for learning', 'Analysing a teaching/learning situation' as well as questions for reflection and discussion.