

Using Music to Manage Challenging Behaviors in the Classroom

by Deanne W. Kells

"Music will help dissolve your perplexities and purify your character and sensibilities, and in time of care and sorrow, will keep a fountain of joy alive in you." —Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Music is often thought of simply as entertainment, but its power as a conjurer of emotions—and therefore a tool to manage feelings and their resultant behavior—is undeniable. For children especially, music can help instill calm, promote self-regulation and impart joy. The more music is present in a classroom—or in the home—the better. Here are three ways in which music can create a positive difference for young learners when they most need it.



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educational publishing. A specialist in emergent literacy, Kells has worked at the executive level to formulate content that is appropriate for children from birth up. In her position at Kindermusik, Kells is thrilled to combine her early childhood expertise with her love of music (she is the child of two musicians) and her fervid belief that music makes a powerful positive difference for all learners. To learn more about what Kells and Kindermusik are focusing on, follow her blog: www.kindermusik.com/mindsonmusic/

Using Music to Create Feelings of Safety and Security

One reason transitions during the school day can feel chaotic and stressful is that many children struggle during any time of change. Separating from caregivers, leaving a favorite activity behind to go to another, moving from inside to outside environments or vice versa—you name it, these changes can be stress triggers. The good news is that building music into transitions can help smooth things out. Let's look at a couple of examples.

■ Toddler Lily struggled daily when Mimi, her caregiver, dropped her off at child care. It did not matter how welcoming the staff members were or how reassuring Mimi was. Lily was unhappy for about 15 minutes every morning, and the pattern persisted well beyond the usual "new school jitters." Then, Lily's teacher tried something special. She taught all the children in her room a simple hello song. They sang it together over and over, with the teacher substituting each child's name in the opening line of greeting. Once the song was very familiar, she played it in the background every day at arrival time and used it to greet each child—with the children who were already there joining in as well. Gradually, Lily started to relax during drop-off. The song was familiar, it was personalized for her, and it was part of her daily routine. Before too long, her morning unhappiness disappeared entirely.

■ Mr. Arthur found himself exasperated nearly every day as he tried to get his four-year-olds back inside after outdoor play time. "It's like trying to herd cats," he heard himself mutter one day. That is when he paid closer attention to the problem. He could see that the children were so immersed in their imaginary play

that they needed time to emerge back into "real time." Mr. Arthur's announcement that it was time to go inside was not being heard, much less processed, by the children. So, he thought of a familiar song with three short, predictable verses. He began singing it with the children and making sure they heard the sequence represented by the verses. Once he was sure they had that down, Mr. Arthur told the children this would be the song he would play outside when it was nearly time to line up to go inside. He advised them that he expected them to be in line by the time the song ended. It worked! The song gave the children enough time to leave their imaginary play behind. Because the verses (and the order of the verses) were so familiar, they knew exactly when they should be lined up. They even had fun singing as they did so!

It is clear that music can set a mood. Want children to relax? Play something calm. Want children to get their wiggles out? Play something lively and let them get up and move! Want to call attention to the idea that you are all part of a learning, loving community? Play something familiar that everyone can sing along to together.

As Lily's teacher and Mr. Arthur learned, music can help define expectations for young children. When the music chosen is familiar, predictable and routinely used, it can give children confidence that they know exactly what is about to happen and when. Remember: children like routines and limits because these things make them feel safe.

Using Music to Promote Self-Regulation

People talk a great deal about the importance of teaching children self-regulation skills, but not everyone

knows exactly what these are. Self-regulation begins in the brain and is made visible in behavior and displayed emotions. Children who can self-regulate are able to remain calm and soothe themselves in stressful or frustrating situations, delay gratification, and adjust to unexpected changes. Self-regulated children wait their turns, share easily with others and listen carefully.

Self-regulation develops gradually across the years of early childhood. The beginning stages of self-regulation are about impulse control. For example, we all know two-year-olds who throw tantrums. These are not ill-behaved kids, but rather children who need help learning to control their outbursts. They need coping skills, not adults who attempt to regulate for them by trying to make everything OK.

The good news is that children can be scaffolded through impulse control. Events that trigger outbursts can be broken down into more manageable steps. For example, is it hard to persuade a child to get dressed warmly to go outside in cold weather? Break it down into manageable steps, one item at a time: "Let's get your coat on. Good! Now slide your hands into these mittens. Nice! One more thing—your hat!" That is much less frustrating for a child than contending with an overwhelming pile of mittens, coats, hats and scarves.

No matter what behavior or emotional response needs to be controlled, the first step is always understanding what it feels like to stop yourself from doing something. That is where musical "stop-and-go" activities can help. You might remember the childhood game freeze tag. Everyone runs wildly, trying not to be tagged; when tagged, however, a player must STOP and be still. Now imagine using a familiar song in a similar way. Play the song and have children move freely and safely around the room. When you stop the song, the

children must freeze in place. Always cue them with the words, “... and STOP” before turning the music off. In the ensuing silence, they can literally feel themselves stop; they can feel that they are in control of their actions. Notice all the skills that are a part of these musical activities: focusing, listening and reacting to aural cues. These are the things that help children develop attention and control—the building blocks of self-regulation.

Music is also very helpful for calming children. A familiar, soothing song triggers a calm response and children can even learn to rock themselves into a calm state while listening to music. In classrooms where self-regulation is highlighted, it is common to see “escape nooks” where children take themselves to calm down. Books, pillows and music are typically all a part of a nook’s soothing environment.

Using Music to Refocus Children

Even children who feel safe and secure and show good self-regulatory skills will occasionally have what most adults lovingly refer to as “meltdowns.” (And do we adults not have them, too?) Music can be especially effective at easing everyone back into a better state of mind. There is a powerful brain theory behind this.

Research has shown that listening to music lowers cortisol levels. Since cortisol is commonly known as the “stress hormone,” it follows that listening to music reduces stress. Scientists have also proven that listening to music increases dopamine. Dopamine is the neurotransmitter that is known as the “motivation molecule” because it leads to the type of feel-good moments you might experience when eating a favorite food or completing a physically satisfying workout. Feeling blue and out of chocolate? Turn on a song for a dose of mood-enhancing dopamine.

So, if a child is feeling stressed, frustrated, angry—any of the emotions that might lead to the dreaded meltdown—you can turn to music to ease those feelings. It is especially helpful if you know a child’s favorite song. That song is the one that will have the most immediate positive effects. If you are regularly

using music in your classroom, you will soon know which song will help each child. Play or sing that tune at opportune moments to help the children in your classroom feel calm, happy and secure—after all, that is when the best learning happens.

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This is the first in a series of three articles by our colleagues at Kindermusik International. Look for the next installment in the March/April 2019 issue of Exchange.



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