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FAMILY

Fun for Little Drummer Boys and Girls

Teaching kids first to love music helps when formal instrument lessons begin later.

By BRENDA REES, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Years ago when the "Mozart Effect" emerged as the latest craze to increase intelligence in babies and young children, parents started positioning CD players with classical music next to cribs in order to give their toddlers a step up on the intelligence ladder.

And while researchers still argue over the actual effect music has on children, you don't have to be a scientist to know that music can calm crying babies, energize tired children and delight youngsters. Just *listening* to music is a stimulating experience.

But many parents want their kids to have more than just an appreciation of music. Playing music, they say, gives their children self-esteem, helps them learn about the world and teaches them patience and determination.

"Learning music helps kids with their cognitive growth. They need music just like any other school subject," says Debbie Naggy, mother of three children who study music. "Plus, it's a beautiful thing to learn that they will have with them for the rest of their lives."

Naggy started her children on their own music programs when they were 4 and 5 years old, which is just the right age, according to teachers. Young kids are more open to playing and experimenting with music; their hearing is more sensitive and they aren't afraid of making mistakes. It's a good age to instill good playing habits.

At Music Rhapsody School, which has several Southland locations and is one of the area's oldest early-childhood music programs, little tykes are introduced to the rhythm and beat by dancing and moving to myriad percussion sounds. Working with drumming manufacturer Remo, Music Rhapsody uses percussion instruments--such as marimbas, glockenspiels and drums--that are specially designed for young hands.

"Too many parents think music means formal lessons," says Music Rhapsody owner Lynn Kleiner. "But children first need to be able to understand the music and love it. Timing is the basis of good musicianship."

Many parents encourage their kids to "find the beat" at weekly drum circles sponsored by the Remo Percussion Center of North Hollywood. People of all ages--including many families with children and toddlers--come to whack, pound and experiment.

With exotic rhythms pulsing around them, kids excitedly rush to the shelves lined with tambourines, timbales and congas. Along with senior citizens and young adults, kids find a fun, creative environment.

Eight-year-old Sophie Brady comes regularly to the drum circle with her mother. "You're not afraid to play and you don't get stage fright," she says. "[Drumming] makes everyone so happy."

Once those little ones are hooked on music, parents can face a dizzying array of formal choices. Piano or violin? Group or individual lessons? Suzuki method or Yamaha? Finding an appropriate program or teacher is half the journey (see sidebar). The other half may be realizing that a child's music education demands heaping doses of parent participation.



Allison Venz, 2, left, and Nika Gordi, 3, right, at a community drum circle at Remo Percussion Center.

BRIAN VANDER BRUG / LAT

Some programs require parents to take lessons alongside the child, especially if the student is very young. Parental support can take many forms, but music teachers agree that parents hold the key to their child's success.

"Music takes time--it's not a microwave program," says Kimiko Fujita, owner of the Torrance Yamaha Music Center. "We need patient parents who don't push, but encourage and compliment. We need them to not give up even when the student might feel like it."

Sherry Cadow, music teacher at the Colburn School of Performing Arts in downtown L.A., enjoys hearing the creative things parents do to stay active in their child's music education. One mom combined her son's two loves--music and baseball. "For every 10 minutes he practiced, she would go out and throw the baseball to him for 10 minutes," says Cadow. "It was ingenious."

"Parents need to show their enthusiasm for their child's instrument," continues Cadow. "Sit and listen while they practice. Don't criticize. Be their biggest fan."

Above all, Cadow says, be consistent with lessons and practice time.

"If a child is struggling with an instrument or a lesson, 99% of the time it's because of a lack of consistent practice," says Cadow, who's been teaching for 14 years. "It doesn't matter if it's 10 minutes or 30 minutes or 2 minutes. Every day they have to do it, and soon, once they see their progress, they will get excited and want to do it more. Success fires them up. It's the 'I did it!' factor."

But once kids reach their teenage years, keeping that spark alive can be problematic.

Stephanie Kerin's two children have been studying at the Pasadena Conservatory of Music for the past 10 years. Her kids used to be thrilled with lessons, but now outside activities have caught their attention and threaten practice time. "With my daughter, we switched instruments from piano to cello, and that has rejuvenated her," Kerin says. Good teachers also understand the teenage mentality, she says, and will appropriately restructure lessons.

"My son is sometimes reluctant to go to lessons, but once I get him there, he has a great time," explains Kerin, a single mom. "His teacher is such a father figure. I think about all the good friends and experiences my children have had because of music. It's worth all the ups and downs."

Another way to rekindle teens' musical passions is to introduce new forms, like jazz. "When students get bit by the jazz bug, they get the passion to compose and demonstrate what they can do with their instruments," says Shelly Berg, professor and chair of jazz studies at USC's Thornton School of Music. "Music becomes exciting all over again."

Berg contends that junior high school years are a good time to expose students to jazz because the older they get, the more inhibited they are. "You want them to be feeling free with music," he says.

Berg remembers when his father took him to a jazz concert when he was 11. "It was amazing; it changed my life," he says. "Parents need to be proactive with music and make it part of their value system. Play music around the house and take them to concerts. Expose them to all kinds of music. Love it and they will too."

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Where the Instruments and Tunes Play

Exposing kids to live music is one way to gauge their interest. Here are some inexpensive and free performances and exhibits that might inspire them.

Community Drum Circle--Remo opens its percussion center for community and world music drum circles for all ages. Most Tuesdays, 7 to 8 p.m. Free. *Remo Percussion Center, 7308 Coldwater Canyon Drive, North Hollywood, (818) 982-0461.*

Open House at the Hollywood Bowl--Each week, different musicians entertain and educate young audiences to a variety of musical styles. Workshops are available for children 3 and older. Daily at 9:30, 10:30 and 11:30 a.m. through Aug. 16. \$5 per person, children younger than 2 free; workshops are \$2 per child. *2301 N. Highland Ave., L.A., (323) 850-2000.*

Hollywood Bowl Rehearsal--Bring a picnic while listening to the Los Angeles Philharmonic's rehearsals. Daily 9:30 to 12:30 p.m. except some Mondays and most Wednesdays. Call in advance to check schedules. Free. 2301 N. Highland Ave., L.A., (323) 850-2000.

San Bernardino County Museum--Two new musical exhibits: "Let's Make Music" involves the principles of sound and music, featuring 27 interactive devices, 10 sound rooms and a 15-foot-long piano keyboard that can be played with the feet. "And the Beat Goes On" presents musical instruments from the museums and anthropology collections. \$4 adults, \$2 kids. 2024 Orange Tree Lane, Redlands, (909) 307-2669.

Pershing Square Summer Concerts--Every Tuesday and Thursday from noon to 2 p.m., a variety of musicians will perform rock, pop, country, jazz and more. Acoustical concerts are Sundays, 3 to 5 p.m. Free. 532 S. Olive St., L.A., (213) 847-4970.

Friday Night Jazz and Sunday Live at Los Angeles County Museum of Art--Jazz acts head up Friday nights from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m., and chamber music takes over on Sunday evenings at 6 p.m. Free. 5905 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 485-6873.

Symphony in the Glen--Family-friendly classical concerts. Pre-concert activities include a conducting workshop and hands-on experience of orchestra instruments. Next concerts are Sept. 8 and Oct. 6 at 3:15 p.m. Pre-concert activities start at 1:30 p.m. Free. Griffith Park, off Crystal Springs Drive, L.A., (213) 955-6976.

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Finding the Right Teacher

Picking a music teacher can be overwhelming, but experts agree that finding the right one is critical for children to succeed.

Gary L. Ingle, executive director of the Music Teachers National Assn., suggests parents ask friends and schoolteachers for recommendations. People who work at music stores or on the faculty of local colleges can also be a great resource.

Then, he says, interview prospective teachers about their own schooling and teaching experience. "Arrange to sit in on a lesson and see how the teaching is done. If the teacher feels sitting in is too intrusive, ask if they are having a student recital and attend that.

"It's important parents look beyond specific methods and find a teacher who is appropriate and whose personality is compatible to their child's," Ingle says. "Find a teacher who creates a dynamic learning environment that's built on collaboration, trust and enjoyment."

Here's an overview of some of the many music schools and programs around Southern California:

The Colburn School of Performing Arts--Around since 1952, it's the West Coast equivalent of the Juilliard School of Performing Arts. Classes are for children ages 2 1/2 to 18. 200 S. Grand Ave., downtown L.A., (213) 621-2200.

Pasadena Conservatory of Music--Infants to senior citizens are enrolled in a wide curriculum; many of the current 1,000 students are young adults. 100 N. Hill Ave., Pasadena, (626) 683-3355.

Torrance Yamaha Music Center--All instructors are certified Yamaha music education specialists who teach students from 3 years old to adult. 22817 Hawthorne Blvd., Torrance, (310) 539-8882.

Music Rhapsody--Now in its 20th year, the program offers classes and summer camp experiences at four locations: Manhattan Beach, Redondo Beach, Santa Monica and Los Angeles. 1603 Aviation Blvd., Suite 1, Redondo Beach, (310) 376-8646.

Suzuki Program of Los Angeles--With a staff of 12 teachers trained in the Suzuki method, this program has been in the area more than 25 years. 5233 Lemona Ave., Sherman Oaks, (818) 981-4243.