

# The rhythm of LIFE

In the second of four articles, **Susan Young** explores the potential of dance and other forms of musical movement in early years settings...



**A** group of six three-year-olds are playing out of doors in their nursery garden. There's a small slide and the children are enjoying sliding down, running around back to the steps, climbing up and sliding down again, one after the other.

One of the practitioners stands by the slide, vocalising "whee—e—ee" with a downward pitch slide to match their sliding down. She then notices that the children are stomping up the steps in a regular way, so she makes up a simple chant – "Step, step, step, step, up the steps we go" – to emphasise their rhythmic movement. Later in the day, when the children gather in a circle for a more formal music time, the practitioner returns to the slide movement-play initiated by the children earlier, with its regular rhythms and smooth sliding, downward-pitch phrases. She reminds the children of their play on the slide and they re-enact the movements with stomping feet and arm gestures, vocalising as well. The two movement ideas extend and develop into a contrast between smooth "Whee" movements with arms and a regular stomping with feet to a "Step, step, step" chant.

Practitioners in this nursery looked for ways to integrate musical activity into everyday, playful activity. One of the

ways they did this was to recognise children's movement play as one form – one mode – of children's spontaneous music-making, recognising it as inherently rhythmical, often phrased and dynamically varied. Movement and music are, in a sense, two sides of the same coin; each reinforces and adds to the other. The practitioners looked for this simple sequence from a movement that the children had initiated (often finding these in their larger movements during outdoor free play), picking up on the musical characteristics of these movements, drawing attention to this through vocalising, chanting and simple songs and then later, incorporating these ideas into adult-initiated activity. The strong stomping movements, taken from the climbing up the slide steps, became heavy and strong when acted out in

the nursery room session later in the day. The slide down, its smooth duration acted out in vocal sounds, became freer and more imaginative and expressive. The practitioners might have further developed these two music-movement ideas by 'playing' them on instruments or representing them with marks on paper.

What's important to note is the sequence from children's own, spontaneous movement, picked up and turned into a small music/movement activity by the teacher and then formalised later in the day. This is a reversal of the usual way in which movement with music is introduced into early years practice. The usual way is for a song to be sung or recorded music to be played to which the children are then invited to move. The movements are often suggested to them by the practitioner and the children required to 'fit' their movements to the music they hear. Matching movements to music presents many challenges for young children – at least matching in

a way that results in a true blend of movements to the musical characteristics of the music: its beat, rhythm patterns, or dynamic of the music. Only when there's synchrony of movement rhythm and quality with the music itself, will the experience be a truly 'musical' one.

### Making adjustments

Matching requires children to be able to coordinate their movements to a certain speed or tempo, which in turn calls for physical control. Everyone has a preferred tempo for certain movements based on their body size and weight, on personality, on psychological and physical wellbeing. For small children, their body size is obviously much smaller than the adults working with them, and so their preferred tempi will be different. Many a time I've observed an adult leading a movement activity, a circle game, or song with actions, for example, and noticed that the children have difficulty matching the speed and style of their movement. The way to avoid this is for adults to take the children's own



## findoutmore

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### Care to dance?

FIND INSPIRATION FOR MORE MOVEMENT-BASED ACTIVITIES FROM THE FOLLOWING RESOURCES...

**Lively Time Playsongs: Baby's Active Day in Songs and Pictures** (Audiobook), by Sheena Roberts (A&C Black)

**Let's Go, Zudie-o: Creative Activities for Dance and Music** (Book and CD), Helen MacGregor (A&C Black)

**Dalcroze Eurhythmics** is an approach to learning music through movement. The Dalcroze society ([dalcroze.org.uk](http://dalcroze.org.uk)) offers courses and general information.

**Music with the Under Fours**, by Susan Young describes children's musical development, including movement development (RoutledgeFalmer)

movements as a starting point and adjust their movements to the children's – not ask the children to do the reverse. This may mean that we're the ones taking odd little mini-steps, uncomfortably fast and small – or swinging our arms to and fro with much more energy than feels right for our arm length and weight.

#### AT FIRST

Although very young babies have limited coordination of their own movements, they enjoy rhythmical movements of legs and arms, and these movements are expressive of excitement and pleasure. They'll also pay rapt attention to anyone interacting with them and may join in with small gestures that are well-timed.

#### THEN

Babies rapidly learn to manage their bodies, to be up and

away as crawlers and then toddlers. They can tap and enjoy rhythmically tapping objects to make sounds. Their tapping is regular and they often tap short groups of beats and then pause.

#### AND LATER

Children learn to move their bodies with more control so that they can match their movements to the music they hear. They can join in with hand movements that keep a steady beat and make movements that follow simple rhythm patterns, such as word patterns from songs they know.

### Playing with movement

Lapgames and first baby songs often emphasise rhythmical movement, with jiggling and patting, or moving the babies' limbs in rhythmical ways. These are often enlivening and stimulating to baby. For soothing babies to sleep, parents and carers use rhythmical rocking and swaying at a slow pace. Although not directly moving the babies' bodies, the babies experience this as a form of whole body movement in space.

As they get older, young children enjoy the jiggling, rocking and swinging games that are part of the traditional repertoire of early childhood in most cultures. Adults might make up vocal sounds, chants and simple improvised songs to match with movements of children. Older children enjoy moving freely to recorded music – and ideally settings provide space for them to do it. Adults joining in can encourage the children by noticing movements they're making and imitating them or dancing with them as a partner, holding their hands perhaps.

### Providing for movement play

The most obvious provision for movement play is space. A children's centre in London had a spacious new adjoining room which had just been completed. Furniture and equipment had been slow to arrive, but when it did arrive it stayed in its boxes. Why? The practitioners had found, in the intervening time, that the empty room had generated all kinds of wonderful forms of dance, movement play, drama and role-play. Far from needing all the 'stuff' they realised that the children's play, had, in many respects, been richer without it.

Simple props can stimulate different qualities of movement – ribbons, scarves are familiar, but floating fabric pieces, beanbags to toss and jump over, or ropes on the floor to structure the space can all be useful.

Finally, recorded music can provide a resource for encouraging children's self-initiated moving and dancing. In a Birmingham Reception class, children had watched a DVD of some dancing by Stomp, a group who perform tap dance using everyday items to add extra percussive effects. The CD was then played again and the children had plastic flowerpots to tap and dance with. The children's dancing was video-recorded and that recording was then played back through the interactive whiteboard so that the children could watch themselves. This prompted lots of discussion.

### Going for a song

STRIKE THE RIGHT NOTE WITH THESE MUSICAL RESOURCES...



#### Time to play

Fawns and Freenotes have introduced a range of outdoor instruments. The Watoto, Malaika and Wizawa will allow even the youngest to experiment with music. Call Fawns on 0125 251 5199 or visit [www.fawns.co.uk](http://www.fawns.co.uk)

#### A good sign

Head to the Singing Hands website to discover a fantastic collection of inclusive resources that teach Makaton through multi-sensory songs and rhymes. [singinghands.co.uk](http://singinghands.co.uk)



#### Hit the floor

The Rhythmajig mat is lightweight, foldaway and emblazoned with pairs of feet to encourage good posture during play. It includes ideas for circle activities, and a central 'puddle' – ideal for collecting items to explore. [mesdirect.com](http://mesdirect.com)

