

# What influence does music education have on your child's development?

by Kerstin Wartberg  
(Translated by Mike Hoover)

**Dear parents,** Earlier civilizations already knew that the preoccupation with art in any of its many forms was a logical way to develop inner harmony, a well-balanced character, enthusiasm, and a rich life-experience.

Almost all small children are curious about music and we can observe their spontaneous joy, which manifests itself in many ways: the desire to hum, the urge to move to music, the joy of hearing mother's lullaby, or the fascination when a favourite song is heard and recognized.

## What does the current scientific research say?

Children who begin learning a musical instrument at an early age benefit because their rational, emotional and motor modalities are all stimulated. This has been substantiated by numerous research studies from leading institutions. Some observations by several American and German institutions will be included here:

Max-Planck-Institut for Brain Research in Frankfurt  
Max-Planck-Institut for Neuropsychology in Leipzig  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston  
University of Washington

University of Frankfurt/Main  
University of Tübingen  
University of Münster  
University of California at Irvine

**1. Development of speech:** Several weeks after conception, the ear is the first fully developed human organ. A foetus can already hear and even recognize music. Prenatal psychology reports that music has an impressive influence on fetal development. It follows that the fetus is also capable of listening to the parents' voices. After birth, children will imitate the sounds that they hear, and at the age of five, they will usually command a large vocabulary as well as subconscious grammatical knowledge more complex than can be described in grammar books.

**2. Pre-school learning:** In order to develop linguistically, logically, musically, or emotionally, children need the proper stimulation at the appropriate time.

*The aptitude that ripens from within and wants to unfold does not remain ready for an unlimited time, but atrophies and disappears when the environment does not help it to develop.*

H. Roth in "Pädagogische Psychologie des Lehrens und Lernens" (Pedagogical Psychology of Teaching and Learning)

In each developmental phase, a child develops certain abilities especially well, such as movement, vision, music, speech or emotions.

During these windows of opportunity, "Information Highways" develop between different regions of the brain, connections with which we must live for the rest of our lives.

### 3. Music and logical thinking:

Sounds, harmony and singing provide all-around training for the brain. A study done at the University of California at Irvine found that classical music in particular, strengthens the connections in the brain that are necessary for logical thinking. The effects of music listening and music making are reflected by changes in activation patterns of the cerebral cortex.

Prof. Dr. Günther Bastian (University of Frankfurt/Main) explains: "Playing a musical instrument is one of the most complex of human activities. Even the most simple musical composition demands skills of the intellect (comprehension), the gross and fine motor skills (touch), the emotions (initiative) and the senses. And the precise coordination of the hands and fingers on strings or keys demands well-developed fine motor skills as well as spatial imagination."

*We know from all available studies that children who have music lessons, in addition to normal school, perform better in non-musical disciplines. The active participation in music appears to result in a more holistic brain development – which in turn leads to increased performance in all areas.*

H. Petsche, professor for neurophysiology at the University of Vienna

**4. Movement and motor skills:** Active music making specifically stimulates motor skills. Prof. Dr. Peter Heitkämper at the University of Münster localized the brain's proverbial "musical vein." People who began playing violin or guitar before the age of twelve demonstrated characteristic changes in the cerebral cortex. In a brain region receiving signals from muscle, skin and joints, there were significantly more nerve cells responsible for the fingers of the fingering hand than were present in people who had begun playing later in life.

**5. Music and Social Behavior:** Prof. Dr. Günther Bastian carried out a six-year study in Berlin grade schools. "The result [social behavior] appears to me sensational and a political call – indeed an urgent social challenge – to counter the aggression and violence in our public schools with 'more music' – both qualitative and quantitative."

He continues: "Already [...] we can demonstrate that playing an instrument and making music in an ensemble positively influences the social and group behavior of children in an impressive manner.

Making music promotes social competence, provides motor, intellectual and emotional behavioral skills which encourage general sociability, indeed, the readiness to establish contact and joy in making contact. It supports group cohesion through a feeling of mutual responsibility (making music with the accountability for success in concert preparation and execution), and contributes significantly to socially integrative behaviours."

## What do parents of children who actively participate in music say?

Scientific findings notwithstanding, the consequences of music education appear more evident from the parents' point of view. During a Suzuki workshop in October 2005, a written survey was carried out to find out if and how instrumental lessons had influenced children in their personal development. What follows is not a statistical analysis, but rather a listing of the most common and/or most original and interesting responses. They should inspire and fortify your decision to continue in partnership together along the path that you have chosen.

All parents who participated in the study responded in the category **Intellectual Abilities**:

Through instrumental lessons my child has learned, ...

- ◆ *to concentrate better and longer*
- ◆ *to improve his memory skills*
- ◆ *to approach something new systematically and in small steps.*

*The intellect is good for means and ways,  
but useless for goals and values.*

**Albert Einstein**

Most parents recognized that playing an instrument helped develop **positive character traits** in their children and good discipline through daily practice.

*During violin playing, my son is forced to overcome laziness and disorderliness, place fingers accurately, and exert himself. We still have a long way to go, but things are continuously improving!*

Father of a ten-year-old boy (violin lessons for five years)

*Through music making, my daughter has realized that it pays off to work hard and take on a challenge rather than to be passive.*

Mother of a nine-year-old girl (violin lessons for three years)

*We have survived the first laborious years. My sons have learned much more than just a few pieces. Nothing happens without effort, but the dedication is worth it!*

Mother of two seven-year-old boys (violin lessons for two years)

*A while ago, my son played his violin at a birthday party. His friends listened in amazement and smothered him with praise afterwards. My somewhat shy son was extremely happy. I am convinced that playing the violin has stimulated him very much, especially in his concentration skills, his approach to new things, and in strengthening his self-confidence.*

Mother of a seven-year-old boy (lessons for two years)

According to the survey, parents want to strengthen the following character and personality traits in their children:

- ◆ *patience and self-discipline*
- ◆ *perseverance, continuity and regularity*
- ◆ *conscientiousness*
- ◆ *ability to work independently, perseverance during practice (even when enthusiasm is lacking) in order to be happy with results that come later*
- ◆ *trust in personal abilities, even in light of weaknesses*
- ◆ *overcoming personal fears through development of a healthy self-confidence*
- ◆ *building an active life philosophy as well as persistent striving towards improvement*
- ◆ *acceptance of challenges and of one's limits with simultaneous work on stretching them*
- ◆ *confident performance in public*

Concerning **group lessons and participation in ensembles**, parents made the following comments:

Here my child can learn,

- ◆ *not to disrupt and to be more considerate of others*
- ◆ *to lead a group (to radiate strength and confidence)*
- ◆ *to support and help less confident students*
- ◆ *to treat other children, parents and teachers in a friendly and sensitive manner*
- ◆ *to observe carefully*
- ◆ *to be open towards teachers and students and build friendships*
- ◆ *to play for other children and parents*
- ◆ *to be a good example for younger students*
- ◆ *to overcome inhibitions towards other people*
- ◆ *to create joy personally and for an audience by playing music with others*

*In the group, my son learns to concentrate on the collective task rather than on his own importance.*

Mother of a seven-year-old boy (violin lessons for three years)

*Our daughter had problems making eye contact with adults before she began with violin lessons. She also did not want to be observed or admired. Through violin lessons, her expression has become more open. She looks at her teacher with concentration and follows the individual learning steps. Participation in group lessons has made her much more open and free.*

Mother of a thirteen-year-old girl (lessons for six years)

*My daughter liked group lessons most of all during the first years of lessons. Now, the individual lesson has become just as important. She has learned the importance of review in the group. With the other students she has prepared a concert program in a very short time that can be performed without stage fright and nervousness. This leads to important feelings of success together with feelings of being needed and a sense of mutual responsibility. She has developed an attitude that I would characterize as socially responsible.*

Mother of an eleven-year-old girl (lessons for five years)

**The meaning of music for your child's life** was described in many different ways by parents:

Through music and active participation in music making, my child can ...

- ◆ *improve his/her frame of mind*
- ◆ *achieve a better balance between school and sports*
- ◆ *provide an outlet for anxiety or aggression*
- ◆ *channel and express emotions – also in front of people*
- ◆ *expand his/her horizon through a connection with the world of classical music*
- ◆ *grow with an art form that reflects harmony in an imaginative way*
- ◆ *discover and train an appreciation for beauty*
- ◆ *develop an understanding and respect for art*
- ◆ *strengthen intellectual and spiritual qualities*

*My extremely sensitive child has found an outlet for his feelings through music. In our first encounter with the piece, "The Two Grenadiers," I first read him the story. We then listened to the piece on the CD. He began to weep bitterly over the sadness in this story. But because of the "happy end" this has become one of his favorite pieces. I often remind him that after difficulties in life, something good happens, just as in The Two Grenadiers.*

Mother of a six-year-old son (lessons for one-and-a-half years)

*Music captures the body, intellect and spirit all at the same time. It makes me happy, frees me, and moves me. It relaxes me and makes me receptive for higher ideals. I want to pass this on to my child.*

Father of a seven-year-old girl (lessons for three years)

*Through the personal experience of learning an instrument and active participation in music, values become anchored in my child's consciousness that are extremely important in these confusing times..*

Mother of an eleven-year-old girl (lessons for five years)

*Music gives the soul wings. They should carry my daughter to a world between fantasy and reality and show her the way to the lost paradise.*

Mother of an eight-year-old girl (lessons for 5 years)

**Dear parents,** Perhaps you would find even more interesting things to say in this survey. Reflecting upon what your children may need and what you are willing to offer them can contribute greatly to their healthy development.

Which seed  
do you want to sow?

*Sow an idea,*

*and you reap an act;*

*Sow an act,*

*and you reap a habit;*

*Sow a habit,*

*and you reap a character;*

*Sow a character,*

*and you reap a destiny.*

Charles Reade