Assignment 3a
Musical Concepts Young Children Can Learn

Teaching music to young children is fun, because they enjoy it so much. “The Ants go Marching,” “Skip to My Lou,” “Looby Lou” and other commonly heard early childhood music used during the day allow for release of energy, relaxation, and pure enjoyment. The exposure to music also promotes an understanding of musical concepts. With forethought, early childhood teachers can teach their children musical information that forms the basis for later development of musical knowledge.

Among the musical concepts that preschoolers can learn are these:

1. A song is called a *melody*.
2. Melodies, when sung, go up and down (often referred to as the *tune*).
3. A single musical tone is called a *pitch*.
4. Music can be sung fast or slow (called *tempo*).
5. Music can be loud or soft (called *dynamics*).
6. Music has a *steady beat*.
7. Music also has a *rhythm*.

Learning these musical concepts requires that teachers are intentional about the musical experiences they plan for the classroom. The following paragraphs describe a variety of approaches for introducing musical concepts to children when music is being sung or played.

**1. A song is called a melody.**

When teachers request favorite songs from children, they can teach the concept of melody by referring to the songs as melodies. When a child says, “I want to sing ‘Hickory, Dickory, Dock,’” the teacher can say, “That’s one of my favorite melodies, too.” Or, she can ask, “What other melody do you want to sing?” Just referring to a song as a melody is sufficient enough to help children learn this simple concept.

A teacher might state as she gathers children together for circle time that they are coming to the group to hear stories and sing melodies. Using the word *melody* in context will help children grasp the concept. The teacher will soon begin to hear the children ask, “What melodies are we going to sing today?” or otherwise use the word in appropriate ways.
2. Melodies, when sung, go up and down (often referred to as the tune).

An easy way to help children understand that melodies go up and down is to move one’s hand in the direction of the melody. If the pitch is high, then the teacher can hold her hand high. If the pitch is low, the teacher can hold her hand low. Or, for older children she can draw a line indicating the direction of the pitch. As an example, if she sings “Have You Ever Seen a Lassie?” the lines might look like this:

![Melody Lines]

Children could also stand up tall when they hear high pitches or squat low when they hear low notes. The correctness of placement is not as important as the understanding that sometimes notes are high and sometimes notes are low. As a bonus, this activity involves movement with the music.

3. A single musical tone is called a pitch.

Matching pitches is an enjoyable activity for preschool children. The teacher can sing or hum a single pitch (or note) and ask children to hum the same note. She can sing “hello” on two different notes and ask children to respond. This is a good way to say “good morning” to children as they arrive each day.

Asking children to match pitches is important for two reasons: (1) it helps children attend to specific notes; and (2) it allows teachers to discover how well children hear and imitate sounds. The second reason is important in determining whether children have difficulties hearing and are in need of speech therapy services. Just using the term *pitch* helps children become aware of what the word means.

4. Music can be sung fast or slow (called tempo).

Tempo is an easy concept to teach. Ask children to sing any song they know in a very slow fashion, and then ask them to sing the same song quickly. Explaining the term *tempo* is simple after doing this activity. Playing a rousing march and then a sweet lullaby is another concrete illustration of *tempo* that young children can understand. Using a well-known fingerplay or chant in fast and slow tempos will teach children about the speed of music.
5. Music can be loud or soft (called dynamics).

Singing a song loudly and then singing it quietly provides children information about the dynamics of music. If teachers use CD’s in their classrooms, the volume control can also help children learn about loud and soft music. Playing a musical instrument loudly and then softly will demonstrate the same concept. One word of caution is that children should not shout while singing, because their vocal cords may be harmed if they shout or sing too loudly.

6. Music has a steady beat.

When people clap their hands, tap their feet, or snap their fingers to the beat of the music, they are using the steady beat. Every piece of music has a steady beat. Clapping thighs, nodding heads, patting one’s chest, or swaying are examples of responding to the steady beat of music. Sometimes called “keeping time with the music,” this concept correlates well with tempo, because steady beats can be fast or slow.

Most movement activities will allow teachers to call attention to the steady beat concept. When children clap, march, sway, tiptoe, skate, skip, hop, jump, or stamp their feet in place to music, they are most likely moving to the steady beat.

7. Music also has a rhythm.

The beat of the melody is its rhythm. People keep time with a steady beat, but the song’s rhythm is its distinctive character. With “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” the steady beat counts one – two – three – four. Its rhythm, on the other hand, counts one-and, two-and, three-and four, one-and two, three-and four. The differences in the beat and the rhythm are shown here:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Mary had a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb.} \\
1 & 2 & 3 & 4, & 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 \quad \text{(steady beat)} \\
1 & & 2 & & 3 & & 4 & & 1 & & 2 & & 3 & & 4 \quad \text{(rhythm)}
\end{align*}
\]

After children have had plenty of experience with a specific song, they can usually recognize it by its rhythm. One way to remember the difference between the beat and the rhythm is that the rhythm provides clues about what the words might be, but the steady beat does not.

Try humming a simple, easily recognized song and let the children try to guess what the song is. Then turn the tables and let them hum a song and you guess what it is!
Names, just like all words, have rhythm, too. A person’s name (her rhythm) can be notated musically. Here are some names with their respective rhythms:

Joe Kortz
/ / 

Cindy Blackman
/ / / 

Baby Ruth
/ / / 

Kerry Price
/ / 

Vic Sanjay
/ / / 

Cody Chandler
/ / / 

Two important tips about teaching children musical concepts to children are that the instruction should be made casually and over time. Children do not need direct instruction about music. What they need are musical experiences that teachers use to introduce musical terminology to children. After singing a song many, many times, then it is appropriate for the teacher to suggest that the song has a certain rhythm or to suggest that it can be sung with a faster tempo. The terminology about music should always be secondary to the involvement and enjoyment of the musical event itself.