



Something to Sing About

Introducing your kids to songwriting

by Donald Fraser

Over the years, I've had the joy of leading many music workshops for children. And I can tell you, there are few things more enjoyable, unpredictable, and downright silly than writing songs with kids.

It's hard not to have a good time banging out rhythms, teasing out wacky rhymes, and singing from the bottom of your lungs (and hearts).

But learning to write songs is more than just good fun. Over the span of just a couple of hours, I've seen kids overcome their shyness and increase their self-confidence through the excitement of shared creativity.

And over the long term, I've seen these same kids make giant leaps in creative, social, and personal development as they became more passionate about their music. They also had a greater awareness of their feelings and were better equipped to express them.

The joys, skills and rewards of songwriting are available to every child. And you don't need me to teach them. You can do it yourself, even if you have no musical inclination.

Here's how.

Listen to the music

Start the songwriting process by singing to your kids when they are babies, suggests Theresa McKay, a professionally published composer, special education teacher, and

creative mom. "Every child has an inherent desire to sing," says McKay. "Try singing some of their pre-verbal sounds back to them and watch how they react. They'll be delighted."

Then "see if you can get them to repeat simple musical phrases back to you. Just a few notes at a time. After awhile, start adding notes. While you won't be creating actual songs at this stage, you'll be nurturing their musicality."

As your child grows, create a musical environment around them. Make sure that music is a major part of your daily life – listen constantly, and sing along!

I've recently come across Kids Public Radio online (kidspublicradio.org) which streams a great combination of classic kids' songs, child-friendly music by pop, rock, and country artists, as well as favourites by the like of Raffi and Sharon, Lois, & Bram. It'll be a



guaranteed hit with your kids – and for the kid in you.

And be sure to take your kids to free festivals and community events, says Charles Glasspool, a music teacher, songwriter, and member of the musical group The Silver Hearts. "Also go to your local library and schools whenever they have performances," says Glasspool. "And try to take in as much folk music as possible. It is usually very simple in construction and easy for children to follow."

Glasspool notes that, "The more you surround your children with music, the more they are going to crave it. And the better palette of musical colours they'll have to paint with as they grow."

Sing, sing a song

When your kids reach grade 1, they'll learn the fundamentals of rhythm, melody, and rhyme. This is the perfect time for you to encourage early forms of songwriting.

How? By singing and making music together. The human voice is really the only instrument you need. I remember my rather tone-deaf father igniting my passion for music simply by having bath time sing-a-longs of "There's a Hole in the Bottom of the Sea" and "Paddy McGinty's Goat."

Help your kids make their own rhythm

instruments – paper plate tambourines, for example – so they can play along as you sing favourite songs together. (See sidebar)

Of course, a musical mom or dad can accompany songs on guitar or piano to introduce the idea of using instruments in the singing/songwriting practice. But if you don't play, and would like to learn how the songs go or hear the melody as you sing together, here are some great options:

- ▶ Visit the (American) National Institute of Environment Health Science's kids' music page. It is filled with lyrics and built-in music players to guide you through the words and melodies of your child's favourite songs. (<http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/games/songs/index.htm>)
- ▶ Sing along to pre-recorded music. The Free Kids' Music page (<http://freekidsmusic.com>) has a pretty good list of songs to choose from.
- ▶ Download an app onto your smartphone or tablet that lets you replicate guitar and piano chords. Find out the chords for your favourite song (just google "chords, Found a Peanut") and you'll be "strumming" along in minutes.

Singing together will give your kids a sense of timing (meter) and rhyme. Of particular value and appeal to kids are songs that have a call and response, such as, "On top of spaghetti" "ALL COVERED IN CHEESE". You may tire of them, but your kids never will.

Move on to songs that allow them to make up their own words – their very first attempts at songwriting. "Down by the Bay" is a good example: "Have you ever seen a bear/In pink underwear?"

From there, try songs that allow kids to add their very own one-line verses, such as "Found a Peanut", "She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain" or "The Ants go Marching." When the ants go marching one by one, the

little one can stop "for a hotdog bun!" or "to look at the sun!"

Let your kids come up with their own concepts for these short verses, but help them increase their understanding of rhyme and rhythm by asking questions. "Does that rhyme with one?" "What are some words that rhyme with one?" "Is there a shorter way to say, 'to stop and eat a whole hotdog bun?'"

Don't worry, be happy

As your kids progress musically – and as they start developing stronger language skills – move onto more difficult material. Encour-

age them to write new words to the tune of old favourites. Slow folks songs, such as "On Top of Spaghetti," are good starting points.

Don't expect their songs to follow a logical theme. Really, just getting through a verse or two of rhyming and meter will be enough. While the song may not make much sense, it will be fun to compose and to sing – and that's

exactly what you want your child's early songwriting experiences to be.

"This is no time to be a critic," says Glasspool. "This is a time where you have to allow kids to be expressive and experimental and to encourage their creativity."

Give your kids a way to track their achievements by recording all of these early songwriting ventures, suggests McKay. And keep recording as they continue to develop, right up to adulthood.

"It will help children return to where they were when they started writing any song or verse," she says. "What's more, over time, these recordings will allow them to see their own musical growth and development."

All by myself

Some kids will take to songwriting and some won't.



Photo: Gerra Weatherbe

Jam Time Jamboree Instruments

Here are some great rhythm instruments to make with your kids.

Tambourine

- Thick paper plates
- Glue
- Hole punch
- Jingle bells
- Yarn or string
- Paints, kids' markers, or crayons

Glue two paper plates together, facing each other. Punch holes around the plates and tie jingle bells to the holes with string.

Decorate with crayons, markers or paint.

Cardboard Washboard

- Large corrugated cardboard box
- Pencil
- Scissors
- Paint and brushes
- Glue

Draw and cut out two washboard shapes on large, flat pieces of corrugated cardboard box (Google "washboards" for the exact shape). Don't forget the handles.

Paint and decorate one side of the first washboard.

Peel off the top layer of paper from the second washboard to expose the corrugated ridges. Glue this to the unpainted side of the first washboard.

Run your fingers across the bumpy surface for an old-timey, bluegrass sound.

But by providing a supportive and musical environment – and by encouraging your child through early songwriting activities – you are giving them the opportunity to explore a rewarding outlet for their creativity. If they're really into it, they'll gravitate towards an instrument – most likely guitar or piano.

Don't be surprised if your budding songwriter starts writing from the privacy of his or her own room. Writing about emotions, relationships, and beliefs when others are within earshot is not easy – particularly when those ears belong to parents!

Continue to encourage your child, but let him or her have some space. Ask how a new song is coming, but don't push to hear it.

Soon enough, if the desire to write and perform is strong enough, your child will start sharing songs with you. And when that time comes, it will be magical.

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