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# EARLY CHILDHOOD CONNECTIONS

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## Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Music

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# The DEVELOPMENTAL ORIENTATION: LEARNING *to* LET CHILDREN LEARN

by Kenneth K. Gullmartin

**T**eaching, like parenting, is a full-immersion endeavor — it uses all parts of us and there's always a great deal to do. This is especially true of teaching early childhood music because it is so multi-faceted. Even when we have the theoretical understanding, the practical experience, and an abundance of reper-

toire at our command, it seems we always need to work a little more on the many skills required — vocal, movement, instrumental, improvisational, presentational. And, like parents who love and sacrifice for their children and want for them the very best care and opportunities, we as teachers can become puzzled, worried,

frustrated, and even angry when all our efforts don't seem to be producing the happy little music-makers we envision.

When I start feeling this way, it's always a sign to me that I've lost my bearings and need to reorient myself. I need to put myself back in what I've come to call the *developmental orientation*, as distinct from the *instructional orientation*.<sup>1</sup> In the developmental orientation we operate from a very liberating perspective because we accept that

*In the developmental orientation we operate from a very liberating perspective because we accept that ultimately children teach themselves.*



ultimately children teach themselves — and the younger they are, the more this is true. Good teachers, like good parents, create optimal conditions so that learning and development can happen — it's not to make learning happen with our own effort according to our personal will. We can provide the meal, but it's the child who must ingest, digest, and ultimately choose how to use the energy provided by this meal.

Those of us who are music educators were not prepared for this kind of teaching by our music training — in fact, that training might work against us. Even if you are not a music educator, you probably took lessons taught in that tradition. For example, if I'm a piano teacher, I'm hired to instruct my students on how to play piano. In doing this, I have certain expectations about how the learning will go (in terms of practicing and progress), and I measure the results accordingly. My students (and/or my students' parents) and I become quite goal-oriented, and we all feel good when we are accomplishing a lot. Periodically, I will evaluate the level of achievement my students are attaining as we work toward our common goal — some kind of performance, even if it's an "informal" performance for the family.

In the developmental orientation, however, I think of myself more as a guide than a teacher. I *facilitate* rather than instruct, and I make observations of what is actually happening instead of measuring this against my expectations of what should be happening. Rather than being goal-oriented, I am goal-supportive, meaning that I reinforce spontaneous behaviors that I know support development, but I don't directly instruct or require those behaviors from the children. I'm much more interested in what children are experiencing than in what they are accomplishing. Consequently, I evaluate the level of *absorption* or involvement in the experience rather than the level of achievement. And, certainly, my end goal

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is not a performance of any kind — that is, a presentation for others to enjoy. Instead, it's the children's participation in the experiences offered for pleasure and developmental benefits that they themselves will enjoy.<sup>2</sup>

There is one more area of comparison, which is really a function of all the above, and that is *interpretation*, especially in the service of *evaluation*. In the instructional orientation our responsibility is to transmit content, meaning that we will notice if the re-creation of that content corresponds to what we are trying to transmit. For example, if we observe that a student's playing does not correspond with the score, we will interpret this discrepancy as "wrong notes." In the developmental orientation, however, the "wrong" notes are really of no concern since our responsibility is to support process. We like to notice "right" notes or moments of correspondence that indicate some assimilation of the material. But most of the time we probably feel ecstatic (and fulfilled as teachers) simply because something somewhat akin to notes is happening at all! Beyond that, we understand how a "babble" or "scribble" stage process works and have confidence in the self-correcting properties of the process over time.

### **DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE**

Readers of this journal don't need to be convinced of the distinctions between these perspectives. However, as we contrast these orientations further, we realize just how different they essentially are — in focus, perceptions, values, and practice. We also discover how easy it is for any of us to slip into a perspective that is not particularly helpful.

Music education in Western culture is very much a public affair. Even when children spend hours and hours in solitary practice, they are usually preparing for a public presentation. Training our

young to become musicians who can perform for an audience is a grand tradition that extends back many centuries. Even our more recent tradition of general music education in schools, which attempts to serve all children whether they perform or not, is still performance-based since it aspires to create future audiences that can appreciate musical performances. Even when children study "just for their own pleasure," they learn that music in our culture is essentially a performing art that requires some kind of audience to complete the circle. So whether we end up on or off the stage, and no matter which tradition of study we follow, the path is pretty clear. *In short, the music teacher traditionally tells the child what to learn and how to learn it.*

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is a concept learned from early childhood educators.

While confirming the function and value of primal, instinctive behaviors that are millennia old, DAP is an understanding of how children grow and learn that has evolved relatively recently through observation, research, and its application. Fundamental to DAP is the understanding that children learn through active involvement that is self-directed and intrinsically rewarding — in other words, *play*.

Play is a very private affair. Even when done in groups, it's carried on for its own sake: the players play for themselves and not to present to others. The conditions need to be right: players need a model or example of the behaviors to imitate; they need the right materials and opportunities in an environment that is safe and supportive of exploration; and they benefit from the acknowledging

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*Music education in Western culture is very much a public affair... Play is a very private affair.*

presence of an adult as a kind of benign witness. Genuine appreciation can be very reinforcing, whereas encouragement or praise can become excessive when based more on the adult's agenda than on the child's process. The role of the adult — parent, teacher, caregiver — is constantly to observe and interpret the child's place in development so that the model, the materials, and/or the environment can be adjusted to facilitate and enhance the child's learning. In short, through the teacher's observations, the child "tells" the teacher what to teach.

Early childhood educators have evolved and refined the concept of DAP, as summarized in the following position statement by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC):

Developmentally appropriate practices result from the process of professionals making decisions about the well-being and education of children based on at least three important kinds of information or knowledge:

1. **What is known about child development and learning** — knowledge of age-related human characteristics that permits general predictions within an age range about what activities, materials, interactions, or experiences will be safe, healthy, interesting, achievable, and also challenging to children;
2. **What is known about the strengths, interests, and needs of each individual child** in the group to be able to adapt for and be responsive to inevitable individual variation; and
3. **Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live** to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for the participating children and their families.

Furthermore, each of these dimensions of knowledge — human development and learning, individual characteristics and

experiences, and social and cultural contexts — is dynamic and changing, requiring that early childhood teachers remain learners throughout their careers.<sup>3</sup>

What I admire about this definition is that it places learning theory in the proper perspective — as part of human development in general, and subject to the divergent realities of different cultures, communities, families, and individuals. I especially appreciate that it defines a process for determining DAP rather than attempting to define DAP itself. With such latitude, we are encouraged to flow with the changing needs and challenges that children, families, and music present. Applying NAEYC's position statement on DAP to the state of early childhood music in 21<sup>st</sup>-century North America gives us useful ways to organize the different kinds of information and research we have from many sources:<sup>4</sup>

1. **What is known about child development and learning:**

- All children are born with musical intelligence.
- Children pass through a period of primary music development, during which they teach themselves to "speak" their native music in a "babble" process analogous to language development.
- Children need the model of primary caregivers actively involved in music-making in order to work through this process of primary music development and acquire the disposition to be music-makers themselves.
- Children need developmentally appropriate learning environments that include many opportunities for vocal and movement responses to music in a wide variety of tonalities, meters, and styles, as well as manipulative interactions with simple instruments and activity-related objects.
- Given the presence of such models and environments — which is rarely the case with our modern media culture —

most children can complete primary music development and achieve basic music competence (i.e., they can sing songs in tune and with accurate rhythm) by age 3 or 4.

**2. *What is known about the strengths, interests, and needs of each individual child:***

- Children tend to be either more rhythmically oriented or more tonally oriented. Over time they achieve competence in both domains, but the preference shown in early childhood is often life-long.
- Children exhibit preferred learning styles — visual, auditory, kinesthetic, etc. — very early in life that will affect their experience and expression of music.
- Children's constitutional temperaments affect their preferred level of involvement in group activities. For example, more extroverted children will participate more readily, while more introverted children will often prefer to observe.

**3. *Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live:***

- Family dynamics, such as pregnancy, parent/child relationships, and sibling relationships, will tend to influence a child's behavior and level of participation in parent/child classes.
- Even though essential to the child's acquiring the disposition to be a music-maker, the model provided by today's parents tends to be inadequate or non-existent. It is important to understand that this is the result of a general cultural condition rather than "bad" parenting.
- Largely because of the above condition, it is estimated that the majority of North American children are developmentally delayed in music from 2 to 5 years; that is, they do not achieve basic music competence until age 5 or 6, with many delayed until 8 or 9 (or never!).

**WORKING WITH PARENTS AND OTHER PRIMARY CAREGIVERS**

Since the media explosion of the last century, we have increasingly become consumers of music instead of makers of music. Rather than making music themselves, most North American parents and caregivers tend to listen to music performed by professionals, whether in concert or from the media. By applying performance standards to themselves, even those parents who might be inclined toward making music tend to feel inhibited about expressing themselves musically, whether vocally, in movement or dance, or even in simple instrument play. As a media culture, we have been living more and more in the *performance orientation* — which the instructional orientation naturally supports — and less and less in the *participatory orientation* — which the developmental orientation supports.

Music-making by adults and older children used to happen as part of daily living. Younger children learned to "speak" their native music from the models that were readily available — just as they learned to speak their native language. Considering this, it is no wonder that parents, as well as early childhood and music educators, have such difficulty in really grasping what early childhood music is — we never needed it before! Now, instead of learning music at Mama's breast or Grandpa's knee, families need to go to music classes.

When asked what image comes to mind when we say "music education," most people will indicate music lessons.



***The role of the adult — parent, teacher, caregiver — is constantly to observe and interpret the child's place in development so that the model, the materials, and/or the environment can be adjusted to facilitate and enhance the child's learning.***

Those of us already involved in early childhood music know how hard it can be to explain what we do to the uninitiated who incredulously ask, "How can you teach a baby music?" They tend to think one of two extremes, both stemming from the same misperception that what we do is music lessons: one parent, not wanting to "push," will want to wait until the child is "older"; another, having heard "Mozart makes you smarter," will push to enroll as soon as possible, only to be disappointed by the apparent "chaos" of typical early childhood classes in which

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this learning model works very well in our culture. Can you imagine how strange it would be to have classes and programs and articles devoted to the field of early childhood talking?

Given that the music-making model of primary caregivers is so essential to children's music development and that adults feel inadequate or are unlikely to provide such a model, we face a real challenge. With such an assessment, we realize that much of our work in teaching young children in a developmentally appropriate manner must be about transforming the awareness of parents and caregivers. Somehow we must include

them in our classes and help them be their child's most important music teacher, just as they are with language and other basic life skills. In short, as early childhood music educators, we must attend to what is developmentally appropriate for the adults in our classes as much as for the children.<sup>5</sup>

## **LEARNING TO LET CHILDREN LEARN**

It's important to understand that the instructional and developmental orientations are polarities, as are the performance and participatory orientations. They are not mutually exclusive; ideally, they work together with the what and how of instruction being modulated by the when, why, and who of development. We have seen how these polarities are out of balance in our culture's experience of music, especially in effecting the music development of children from birth to 3 or 4. In the 4- to 8-year-old range, as children gain basic skills, a mix of both orientations can increasingly be used. But it is easy to overdo it — to let the traditions of performance drive our teaching more towards instructing for specific results than towards nurturing a child's unfolding potential — to teach to our adult expectations rather than to watch expectantly where development may lead. This is especially true because of the developmental delay in music that so many children experience. Although their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive functioning may be at normal levels for kindergarten or elementary-aged children, their tonal and rhythm development may only be at a toddler or 2-year-old level. Unless we evaluate these discrepancies from a developmental orientation, we are apt to make the serious mistake of misinterpreting apparent music inadequacies as evidence of minimal interest or lack of "talent."

As in other areas of life, our challenge is to discern the difference between

appearance and reality. The younger children are, the harder it is for us to know their inner reality. As children develop language, we at least have their words to provide some feedback on their inner processes. But at all stages we can rely on the developmental perspective, which gives us the time and space needed for the reality of the child's process to emerge from behind the appearance of his or her behavior. One teacher put it this way: "The lesson I learn many times over is that everything will come together if we just hang in there and let children have their process." Here is this teacher's experience with two very different children:

As a piano teacher I had learned to recognize an attentive, alert face in some kids that showed they were engaged, even though they were not participating. But some children in my early childhood classes mystified me. For example, Martha, who started parent/child classes at 18 months, sat on her mom's lap with a frowning, grim face and never moved a muscle for three whole semesters. Wondering why her mom kept bringing her back to class, I thought, "OK, this must be the one kid who HATES music!... And look at that serene look on the mom's face — she never moves a muscle either!" When they didn't re-enroll for the fourth semester, I figured they had finally given up; but at week-three they suddenly reappeared with her mom's explaining that they had enrolled in preschool. But when Martha began having tantrums, throwing herself on the floor because she wasn't in music class, her mom thought, "Why am I doing this?... We're going back to music!" When I shared my puzzled feelings about Martha's lack of participation, her mom said, "You know I should have told you this before: Martha has been demanding the CD (of the program's songs) 6 hours a day, and whatever intense emotion she had, she wanted the CD to accompany those feelings." Her mother explained that Martha was speech delayed and that her speech development had exploded because she was so desperate to sing the songs.

Another child, Alexander, enrolled at about 20 months and would do nothing but

walk around the perimeter of the room for 45 minutes straight, looking completely spaced out, not present to the group at all, just prowling. His mother was not as accepting as Martha's. She kept wondering why Alex wasn't acting like the rest of the children. It took almost two semesters to train this mom to relax, sit down, play her own instrument, and just let him walk around. To get her to appreciate that Alex was learning something, I had to repeatedly point out that all his CD listening and spontaneous music activity at home, as well as the way his shoulder or imaginary paint brush was moving to the beat in class, were all evidence of music learning. And then one week, early in the third semester, something shifted. Alex came into the middle of the group when the instruments came out and was able to keep steady beat. He could even do that for most of the songs at a variety of tempos — at 2-1/2 he almost had basic rhythmic competence. I recently heard from his mom that he now attends his older sister's chorus rehearsals, and when they don't keep the tempo steady he stomps his right leg and pumps his right arm — with a fist, mind you — in the original tempo that they began with! He's singing in tune, too. Now he's the kid the other moms look at saying, "Why isn't my child focusing like Alexander?"

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These examples illustrate how crucial it can be to allow for individual differences in both learning style and tonal or rhythmic dominance, and how we must always work to facilitate a parent's involvement and understanding. We see the wisdom of not insisting that kinetic, rhythmically-oriented Alexander sit down and pay attention; of not requiring or excessively encouraging introverted, observing, speech-delayed Martha to participate in class; of patiently dealing with the frustrations of Alexander's mother, who is misperceiving her son's

behavior through the expectations of a music culture oriented toward instruction and performance. We see the wisdom of creating an environment in which children teach themselves, learning in their own way and in their own time from the model of the adults who love them.

## **MONITORING OUR OWN PROCESS**

So how do we know when we're slipping out of a developmental perspective into a performance-oriented, instructional mindset that may not be helpful? Consider the following ideas:

- **Teaching the notes more than the child:** The child's experience of musical expression is far more important than the accuracy of what's being expressed. And, it's likely that some of the children in our classes will never make any music that we'll be able to hear — they'll save it all for home, the car, the bathtub, or their own private play.
- **Trying to have them "get it":** Intention is everything. For example, adjusting a song's tempo to the child's tempo is a good way to mirror back rhythmic expression. Some well-meaning early childhood music educators recommend this so that children do not experience discomfort or anxiety at the discrepancy between an external tempo set by a teacher and an internal tempo felt by the child. This strategy is not practical in a group, however, since children initially have divergent personal tempos. Furthermore, until children are developmentally ready, they don't really notice or care about the difference — it's the adult who notices the discrepancy and feels anxious! Similarly, efforts to produce certain behaviors, such as walking the beat or following game structures (e.g., going under the "London Bridge" at the right time), are usually wasted until children have the social, cognitive, and musical readiness for that kind of coordination. It's not that such opportunities can't be offered — we just can't expect children to do them "correctly."

- **Wondering if certain activities are "too hard":** Such doubts reveal a concern for performance goals, and therefore a preoccupation with instruction rather than development. Think of babies who delight in endless experiences that are far too "hard" for them to do — they love "tuning in" at whatever level they can. The poor man's DAP principle we can follow is: "Do anything you want — just don't expect the children to do it."
- **Underestimating children:** One preschool director I have been learning from emphasizes that it's easy to underestimate the capabilities of young children and that it's crucial to give children opportunities to be leaders without requiring them to do so. Often, like so much else in development, when children are ready they spontaneously lead. For example, out of nowhere a reticent child may sing a bit of a song learned 6 months ago. It's important that we catch that moment, at least acknowledge it, and consider going with this contribution rather than sticking to our own agenda. Our acknowledging response can have a tremendous impact on a child's learning and confidence.  
Another way we underestimate children is by not taking our work with them seriously. If we sing silly songs without conviction, they'll know it. Children are serious about being silly! If we bring into the classroom all our knowledge, artistry, musicianship, AND our authentic silliness, children will respect us and will probably be amazed.
- **Not offering enough repetition:** Too often we are afraid that we will bore children with the repetition we know they need. Instead, we need to find ways to vary the experience of a song so that we delight in the repetition as much as the children.
- **Talking, explaining, or trying to teach concepts:** Children don't care if something is "fast" or "slow," "high" or "low." They want the experience of moving fast or singing in a low voice. Until they have basic music competence (i.e., until they can sing in tune and with accurate rhythm), it's generally much better to sing and move than talk.



- **Emphasizing the parts instead of the whole:** In the instructional orientation we teach and learn incrementally. We break the experience down, go step-by-step, do the fundamentals, and then integrate the parts and add complexity. In the developmental orientation, the opposite is true. We understand that children learn everything at once, including non-musical aspects of the experience. When children are immersed in the whole, their unconscious (as opposed to conscious) processes pick and choose what to focus on. When we highlight a part — a bit of melody, a movement, a phrase — we do this simply to experience the whole more deeply rather than for methodical practice and integration of the parts.

It's easy to slip out of the developmental, participatory orientation and become preoccupied with whether or not children are "learning" what you think you are "teaching." Here's an example from my own experience:

Three-and-a-half year old Jonathan had been in my class for several semesters with his mom and infant brother. He had big eyes that watched everything, but he often didn't participate overtly, unless it was on his own terms. So it was no surprise that he did nothing the first week but stare into space during "Sailing Song," a gentle triple meter mixolydian song for movement with scarves.

His mother and I had recently talked about his possible waning interest in class — so I was a bit concerned when he, again, did nothing the next week and simply kept staring into space with those big eyes. Although he appeared fairly engaged during the rest of class, that song somehow left him cold, or so I thought. I wondered, "Was it the song? Not active enough? Was it the scarves? Too frilly?" Something about all this had caught my attention, and I kept obsessively asking the questions: "Was he tired? Was he resting? Was it something I was doing? Wasn't doing? Didn't he like me anymore!?" You get the picture: Jonathan was not fitting into my picture, and it disturbed me. However, I tried not to get too stressed about it or to appear overly concerned, although he must have seen me looking at him furtively from every corner of the room.

Everyone else seemed to love the activity, so I did it again the third week. The sun was shining strongly through the windows, and everyone was sailing multicolored scarves through the air, catching the light, and pretending to be sailboats — a multicolored flotilla on the bay, or perhaps a large aquarium tank filled with tropical fish. But Jonathan was even more intensely non-participatory this time. He kept staring into space, seemingly oblivious to all the activity, staring right through me as I danced in front of him, waving my scarf madly to engage his interest. I noticed his fists were clenched, forearms slightly raised off his lap in front of himself. I glanced at his mother, who raised her eyebrows in resignation. He wasn't making a sound, and yet he could sing very well. He wasn't moving rhythmically, and yet he could also do that well. It looked like he was trying to be some commercial cartoon hero or maybe he was driving a truck. "That's it!" I thought, but I resisted projecting this image, as I had learned from veteran preschool teachers. Instead I asked him: "Jonathan! What are you doing!?" There was a long pause as he continued to stare right through me with the colorful scarves waving in the sunlight, while I desperately struggled to keep from saying, "Driving a truck?". Finally, he whispered intensely, "I'm in my submarine!" Instantly I was there with him, seeing the scarves and other people as fish, the hazy sun as a rippling sea, with the music still undulating through the room like warm ocean currents. He had been totally in the activity all along.

As a composer I've had a long-term relationship with the creative process. Learning to work in the developmental

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orientation has been a similar challenge. The experience is often mysterious, perplexing, even frustrating, and then suddenly revealing, beautiful, and true. Respect, trust, and appreciation become paramount: the respect to allow space for what we may not understand or be able to help; the trust that all is for the best and that although we are essential to the process, we are only one part of it; and appreciation for what is happening, even though it might not be what we expected or wanted to happen. Often, if we allow children the time and make for them the space, we'll be amazed not only at what they learn, but also at what we learn.

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**Kenneth K. Guilmartin** conceived and led the development of the innovative Music Together® early childhood music and movement program for the Center for Music and Young Children® (CMYC), which he founded in 1985. Music Together pioneered the concept of a research-based, developmentally appropriate family music experience for infant, toddler, and preschool children that strongly emphasizes adult involvement and includes the home use of professionally produced recordings.

Active as a composer, author, presenter, and teacher trainer, Guilmartin is a leading advocate of developmentally appropriate practice and adult inclusion in early childhood music. He is co-author (with Lili M. Levinowitz, Ph.D.) and producer of the nine core Music Together song collections, as well as numerous other Music Together publications, recordings, and training materials. As a composer working in styles ranging from the blues to opera, Guilmartin has created scores for numerous off-Broadway and regional theatre productions, as well as for film, video, and concert performance. In addition to teaching at the CMYC "lab" school and various preschools in the Princeton, NJ, area, Ken Guilmartin personally trains hundreds of music and early childhood educators each year nationwide. A former board member of the Music for People Foundation, he has served on the early childhood committees of the Music Teachers National Association Pedagogy Task Force and the 2002 and 2003 MTNA National Conference Program Committee.