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FAMILY CORONAVIRUS COVERAGE

Why music might be the perfect tool to decrease kids' pandemic stress

Don't let canceled classes get in the way of improving children's health through music.

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When COVID-19 forced schools to shut down last spring—and kept many closed this fall—Susan Darrow was worried that music instruction would be left behind.

“Many schools still approach the arts and music as something that’s extra,” explains the CEO of the early childhood program Music Together. “It’s [often] the first thing to get cut.”

So when she began to receive requests from both parents and schools for music resources, she was excited to move her program’s classes online—especially since she believes that children need music now more than ever.

“Music can help us relieve stress naturally,” she says. “If you think about what happens when you sing a song in your car or dance around the kitchen, you instantly feel better. That’s because feel-good chemicals are released when we sing and dance, and music connects us to others. These are all things we’re looking for right now.”

And even though in-person music lessons, band practices, and choir groups may be canceled or limited because of pandemic-related closures, parents can still incorporate music into kids’ everyday routines. These small, easy ideas can have big benefits.

A musical species

After all, we were born musical creatures. “Music-making is one of the very few things that appears in every culture, every region, and every people throughout history,” Darrow says. “What that should tell us is that being musical is part of being human.”

In fact, studies show that music serves similar functions in different cultures around the world—we use it to soothe babies, dance, heal, and express love. One study found that Canadians could accurately identify sadness, joy, and anger in classical Indian ragas, suggesting music is a sort of transcendent language.

From an evolutionary perspective, early humans engaged in music as a bonding activity that promoted social cohesion—the kind of group cooperation that allowed us to survive and flourish as a species. So it's no surprise that we're hardwired to respond to music.

Music and brain health

But music provides benefits that go beyond social bonding—it affects us on a biological level.

For instance, engaging in pleasurable musical activities release reinforcing, feel-good hormones like endorphins and dopamine, which might explain why adults who move in sync to music report liking each other better and trusting each other more. In studies of preterm infants in intensive care, listening to music stabilized heart and respiratory rates, improved feeding and weight gain, and led to more mature sleep patterns. And people who participate in music therapy with licensed practitioners have shown improvement in mood and concentration, and have experienced reduced pain, anxiety, fatigue, and the stress hormone cortisol—without the use of medication.

In children, playing a musical instrument is associated with improved organization and growth of the brain areas responsible for thinking, memory, emotion regulation, and motor coordination. “Music learning supports all learning,” Darrow says. “There's almost nothing you can do that lights up parts of the brain the way music does.”

These benefits aren't just limited to educational settings. Research shows that simply listening to music engages both hemispheres of the brain, activates the body's reward system, and facilitates brain development regardless of whether children receive formal training or not.

Making a musical household

Think of incorporating music into your child's everyday life as part of a wellness intervention that can build resilience at a time when kids are experiencing significant stress. “What if you prescribed music, exercise, nutrition, healthy sleep, and breathing [techniques]?” says James Hudziak, professor of psychiatry, pediatrics, and medicine at the University of Vermont. “Instead of bad things negatively affecting the brain, good things can affect it.”

And regardless of whether your children had in-person instruction or are just beginning their musical journey, Darrow says the most important teacher is often Mom and Dad. “Let your child hear and see you singing, let them see you dancing,” she says.

Parents should make music a natural, everyday habit. “I know families who do a regular family dance party every night after dinner—you just put music on, and everybody jams in the living room. Have a family kitchen jam session with pots and pans and spatulas. Establish a nightly ritual of singing your child to sleep.”

For parents who aren't musically inclined, Darrow has good news: “It doesn't matter how well you do it. As a parent, if you can't sing in tune or keep a beat, your child doesn't learn *how* to sing from you, but do learn to *love* to sing from you.”

Hudziak encourages families to dedicate a few minutes to music appreciation every day, whether that's practicing an instrument or watching a live stream. It can even be as simple as listening to music and tapping a foot, singing along to a song, or bobbing up and down. He also recommends these [music engagement activities](#) from the [Vermont Center for Children, Youth, and Families](#).

Introduce kids to a variety of genres, and practice mindful listening so they're paying attention to music without other distractions. Plenty of [free online resources](#) can help. The [Metropolitan Opera](#) is offering free opera streams, the [Berliner Philharmoniker](#) has a free digital playlist, and full episodes of the kids' music series, *Mister Chris and Friends*, [are available on PBS](#).

The key, Hudziak says, is to make sure kids don't feel pressured to perform like professionals—make it fun. “We made music training a joy, a benefit,” Hudziak says. “This is called incentive-based behavioral training” and can use techniques such as rewarding an hour of music practice or engagement with extra time to play a video game. This not only reinforces the positive behavior but can eventually lead kids to pursue healthy activities on their own because the activities themselves become intrinsically rewarding. ([Here are some tips on using rewards the right way.](#))

“If you believe bad things will lead to bad outcomes, then you have to believe good things may lead to good outcomes,” Hudziak says. “By not having music, exercise, breathing, and good sleep hygiene, we're actually contributing to ... emotional problems and academic decline. There's no greater joy than bringing music to someone and watching it turn their life around.”