



**They don't have to be musicians.
Enjoyment is within everyone's reach**

Give Your Children the Gift of Music

By **Helen Kohl, Canada**

Music Teacher Sandra Beech has no problem persuading the auditorium full of four-to-nine year olds that they have natural rhythm in their bodies. Her audience claps, stomps, even sneezes along with her song, in perfect time. Says the children's musician; "I've even had performances in which every child in the place was dancing in front of the stage."

Most young children are naturally enthusiastic about music. And whether or not they continue to play musical instruments into adulthood, love of music is a gift that will continue to enrich them all their lives. Music educators say that the best way to impart this gift is by making music a part of your children's experience from their earliest days.

Fifteen year old Jonah Hister, who sang for five years with a Bach children's chorus and has sung in opera productions, has always been surrounded by music. His mother, Phyllis Simon, an avid flute player, started taking her children to community music programs when they were only 2 ½ . And she started them in violin at age five.

"You often can't tell whether a child is musically talented until he or she is six or seven," says Donna Wood, founder of the Preparatory Music Program for children at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. **"But long before that, parents can give their children many happy musical experiences. Then, as they grow older, they'll be prepared for more serious study if they wish."**

You don't have to have perfect pitch to croon a lullaby or play a bouncing game with your baby. Toddlers love playing rhythmical clapping games or doing musical finger-play activities. And all youngsters can experiment with inexpensive rhythm instruments, such as shakers, castanets, tambourines or drumsticks. The first and most accessible instrument is the human voice and in school, children should have the chance to experience the pleasure of singing in choirs.

Even when you children are small, you can listen, sing and dance to recorded music with them. Introduce them to the joys of classical music, and take them to the children's concerts so they will hear live music. If you child shows natural ability or keen musical interest, you might want to consider private lessons. "If your kid can repeat a radio or TV commercial jingle to you, on pitch and on key, that's a strong indicator of musical talent," suggests music teacher Sam LaBrecque. "Another is your child's natural rhythm. See if he or she naturally dances to music in time. Or beat a rhythm on the tabletop and see if your child can repeat it."

Private lessons ensure that your child gets focused instruction. A competent instructor should have good referrals or a teacher's certificate from a recognized music school. Ask to observe a lesson or a student recital to get a sense of how the teacher communicates with children. After all, if music lessons aren't enjoyable, your child won't want to go.

But first, you have to help you **child choose the right instrument.** "Choosing the wrong instrument was the most common factor in musical failure – not lack of musicality or music potential," wrote authors Atarah Ben-Tovim and Douglas Boyd after interviews with thousands of children for their book, ***The Right Instrument For Your Child.*** They wonder, for example, what would have happened if violin virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin had been made to learn trumpet originally.

Second, it's important to wait until your **child is physical and mentally ready for the discipline of formal lessons.** The right age is often later than you may think. According to Ben-Tovim and Boyd, "For 95 percent of children, **the best time to start learning their first instrument is sometime between the ages of eight and 11.**"

Younger children may tell you they long to play a musical instrument but that desire is often in the same league as a wish to be a fireman. And keep in mind that **starting young doesn't guarantee a head start.** "What takes a five year old three years to master can also be accomplished by an eight year old in a few months," says Ben-Tovim and Boyd.

Children should be able to read, write and do simple math before they start formal music lessons. In addition, they should have the spare mental energy, after schoolwork, to begin an entirely new activity. "A music class requires children to read symbols on a page and concentrate for a half-hour lesson," explains LaBrecque. "The musical process is slow and should be enjoyed for its own sake."
