

## Setting the tone: Experts say musical ability can be nurtured in young children

By Richard Duckett TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF  
[richard.duckett@telegram.com](mailto:richard.duckett@telegram.com)



Pakachoag Music School teacher Linnea Lyerly works with a young student in the early childhood music program. (T&G Staff/CHRISTINE PETERSON)

One of the best gifts parents can give their children is music.

They can start the giving right now just by singing to their babies and infants, or letting them listen to musical recordings, according to music educators. The music-rich holiday season is an ideal time to begin, and the rewards can be a lifetime of musical participation and enjoyment.

"There's the nurture and the nature," said Sarah Smongeski, executive director of the Pakachoag Music School of Greater Worcester. "I definitely think the nurture piece is significant in people having musical ability. After a certain age the brain moves into another kind of development."

However, the results of a nationwide survey commissioned by Music Together LLC and done online by Harris Poll earlier this year reveal that 72 percent of parents with children under 18 believe that you are born either with or without the ability to carry a tune. The survey also indicates that only 17 percent of parents sing to their children daily. On the other hand, nearly all (98 percent) believe that children need music education.

Kenneth K. Guilmartin, founder and director of Music Together, said in a statement after the survey was published, "It is not true that you are either born musical or not. Just as we are all born with the potential to speak our native language, we are all born with enough music ability to learn to sing in tune and move in time, as long as parents and other primary caregivers provide an adequate music environment during early childhood."

Mrs. Smongeski said, "It's similar to speaking. If all parents were singing as much as they are speaking to their children from birth it really could have a dramatic development."

Music Together, based in Princeton, N.J., is a music education program for children up to 7 years old that is affiliated with community music schools nationwide, including Pakachoag Music School. ....



Jozef Sobiech, 2, plays the "drums" at Pakachoag Music School of Greater Worcester. (T&G Staff/CHRISTINE PETERSON)



Pakachoag Music School teacher Linnea Lyerly sets the tone for young learners.

(T&G Staff/CHRISTINE PETERSON)

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Mrs. Smongeski said groups such as Music Together emerged after "a lot of research about young people and learning and how having the right exposure to music in the formative years was very important."

That makes the results of the Harris survey somewhat surprising to Mrs. Smongeski because she thought those general principles were now widely understood.

"But as I reflected on it, maybe I shouldn't be surprised," she said. For one thing, "this younger generation of parents, I think they've had less music in their own background. Folk music is so natural for young children, and I think we've lost that a bit in society."

Still, music education has come a long way, educators agreed.

"I remember growing up when kids couldn't carry a tune and teachers would ask them not to sing," Ms. Ardizzone [of the Joy of Music Program] said.

Her own childhood experience with music was much more positive. Her father was a pianist. "I remember crawling under the piano with my dad playing. I just remember loving it to be under the piano. I just know what that has meant to me," she said.

"I think we're all born with some innate connection to sound and music. When you watch a baby respond to music it can be delightful. It goes beyond the music, too. It's just a wonderful way to bond with your child or grandchild, just having them close and singing to them. Young children are like sponges, they just absorb so much."

Having absorbed music and rhythm early, children are often more likely to take to learning an instrument, educators said.

"I find that kids who have had the music and movement experience, when they start learning an instrument and reading the music all the musical concepts they've internalized are so much easier to tap into than kids who haven't had that," Ms. Ardizzone said.

Mrs. Smongeski said she saw that with her own son. "Even though my son stopped singing at around age 12 (he thought 'singing was not for boys!'), his firmly grounded pitch and rhythm led him to play jazz trumpet — and he did it well. I knew it was the singing and dancing during the critical formative years — birth to age 5 — that put him on that path to musical success, and academic success too."

So Mrs. Smongeski has a holiday tip. "The holidays are a perfect time to engage your child or grandchild in music-making. Start today. Sing every day. A little or a lot works."

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Contact Richard Duckett at [Richard.Duckett@telegram.com](mailto:Richard.Duckett@telegram.com)