

Supporting Healthy Sibling Development with Music

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Whenever a new baby is welcomed into a family, the entire family grows and changes. With a first child, Mom becomes Mom. Dad becomes Dad. And the new baby becomes the focus of the parents' complete attention. Over time, many Moms and Dads welcome a second, third, or fourth child into the family. Each time, the entire family needs to adapt.

As multiple children grow together in a family, there are many developmental aspects to healthy sibling and family relationships. As a parent of three children myself, and a Sprouting Melodies Provider and music therapist working with many families navigating the early childhood years, I have seen time and time again how parents and children can use music to enhance sibling bonds, develop communication and play skills, and assist each individual family member define their role. With a little bit of thought and preparation, music therapists and parents can use music to support healthy child and family development.

My first experience with the special significance of sibling bonds was when I was expecting my second child. When I was expecting our first born, she would get excited and wake up when she heard her father's voice talking to her. With our second child, if I was concerned about not feeling the baby move in my belly, I would call over her older sister and ask her to talk to the baby. When she spoke to the little one, the baby would squirm and dance every time. With our third born, I carry with me the memories of his older sisters singing "You Are My Sunshine" to him from the moment they first met him. This song, which we all referred to as "his song," traveled with him into the hospital bassinet and for car rides and transitions. This song was the glue that held our children together. While it was supported and encouraged by us as the parents, the connection was truly theirs.

Before Birth

Starting at the very beginning, we can look at how music and singing can be used to promote a healthy start before delivery. We know that babies recognize familiar music when they are born and introducing music that is repeated while in utero can help babies as they transition in their first few months. This priming of familiar music will make music an even more effective tool when the baby is born.

By encouraging siblings to talk to the baby prenatally and sing their favorite songs, you are also starting to develop a healthy shared connection between the siblings. The older child or children will already have an idea of what to "do" with the baby when the little one is born.

Identify a Birth Song for your Child

Children love to hear stories about their birth and how they came into the world. If you used music as a support in your labor and delivery you can share with each child what songs were

playing when they were born. It is also wonderful to identify Birth Songs for each of your children so that they can hold on to what was significant and special about them and their birth. When you are selecting your songs for your younger children, be sure to talk with the older children in the family about what songs were significant when they were newborns. Pick one or two songs that you remember being significant for them as infants and label them. Call them their songs so they can own them, and then identify different songs for the new baby.

Sing it Again

In early childhood development, we know that repetition of familiar songs and melodies will help the child to develop neural connections and develop a sense of safety and trust. Encouraging an older sibling to sing the same song multiple times in a row will support the healthy development of both young children and will give them something constructive and fun to do together that can last for more than a quick 15 second interaction.

Encouraging music making will also support the children in developing social play skills that will carry over as they grow together. A simple song with hand motions that the older sibling can sing and perform will support both the older child's motor skills and language skills and the young child's focus, attention, awareness and visual skills. Inherent in this interaction is the celebration of singing, playing and interacting together in different ways, each child with his or her own role, and working together as a team to complete the task. The older sibling doesn't have the experience of performing without the young sibling serving as an active audience member. At the same time, the young child isn't able to perform the motions or sing the words yet, but benefits from the consistent repetition of the music, the one on one attention and eye contact, and the social experience.

Suggestions for structuring music play with siblings

There are many things that siblings can do together, and ways that music can be incorporated in parent-child groups with sibling pairs. Both children can take turns picking recorded music, or selecting songs to sing. Older siblings can also be supported in singing their favorite songs and "teaching" them to the baby. With little babies, the infant can be seated on the parent's lap or in a high chair with the older child sitting directly in front of them. This makes it easier for the young child to focus visually on the older sibling and it creates a safe distance or space in which the older child can learn how to safely interact with the very young child.

When engaging in lap ride songs, it generally works best if the parent seats the older sibling closest to them and then puts the baby in front. The older child will be supported by the parent, which is essential for many first born children as they desire closeness with the parents. The oldest will also have an opportunity to help care for the younger child.

Young children often enjoy putting on shows for an audience. Older siblings can put on formal and informal shows for their younger siblings. As the younger siblings become more and more active as toddlers and preschoolers, the siblings will learn essential skills about communication, negotiation, leading and following as they create shows together.

As children progress through development, parents can provide music making opportunities that support and challenge siblings as they grow. A parent can focus on a younger child's body

awareness and tolerance of touch, tapping on body parts such as hands, knees and feet, while the older child sings and labels the body parts, using their cognitive and language skills. Older children can also suggest new, creative ideas for ways to move to the music, using their motor planning skills.

When a child becomes an older sibling, they need assistance and support to define this new role. Parents can utilize music to engage children in this new stage of growth. By creating opportunities for older children to be musical helpers, they have opportunities to sing and dance as they interact with the new baby. They can also be assigned the work of playing music instruments, selecting the songs to sing or recordings to play. By having these specific tasks assigned to them, older children are able to find their place in the family and take on a new role and responsibility which will support their developing sense of self.

Early childhood is a delicate time. There is so much learning and changing that needs to take place in those early years. When a new sibling is welcomed into the family, there are additional changes that will need to take place for all of the family members. Using music can connect siblings to each other, to their parents, and to their family as a whole. Music strengthens the connections between family members and creates opportunities to redefine those relationships in safe and supported ways. So the next time you have an opportunity to bring a family together with music, focus on the siblings, and see for yourself how music can create new possibilities.

Recommended Resources

1. ◦Leman, K., & Leman, K. (2009). *The new birth order book: Why you are the way you are?* Grand Rapids, MI: F.H. Revell.
2. ◦Salmon, C., & Schumann, K. (2011). *The secret power of middle children: How middleborns can harness their unexpected and remarkable abilities.* New York, NY: Hudson Street Press.
3. ◦Schwartz, E. (2012). *You and Me Makes...We: A growing together songbook.* Retrieved from <https://raisingharmony.com/shop/you-and-me-makeswe-a-growing-together-songbook/>