

I am a type-A mom and if I allowed myself, I would enroll my young daughter into every brain stretching, make-her-brilliant program that I could find. I am also a musician, and I have a not-so-secret desire for my daughter to LOVE music as well. But I know better, and I am doing my best to back off.

When my daughter was 2 she fell in love with the violin. “Here begins my daughter’s life as a prodigy!”—or so I thought. We started lessons with her 1/32nd size violin (yes, seriously!) with a sweet woman who told me several times that she thought 2 was too young, but that we could try. At first Fiona enjoyed the Suzuki lessons, and since parents also take lessons with the child, I got to enjoy them as well. I have never played an instrument like a virtuoso (most likely culprits: my impatience and struggle with discipline), but I dabble in guitar and piano, and voice is my main instrument. I understand music and can read it, and I have a good ear, so it was gratifying to me that the violin teacher thought I was doing well at my beginning violin scratches. I never knew that playing a violin was so difficult! With piano, you don’t have to spend weeks learning how to pick it up, carry it, hold it, and squeeze it under your chin. Did you know that you have to hold the violin with your chin and shoulder? Your left hand really can’t help; it needs to be free to race up and down the fingerboard. I had no idea.

Mary, our teacher, had several beloved pet turtles, and after each lesson we got to go visit them: Cookie, Brownie, Coaster and Buster, who are land turtles, plus Chip and Rocky, the water turtles. After several months, it became clear that my daughter was looking forward to visiting the turtles more than the violin lesson itself, so we “took a break.” I tried not to think of this as a failure, as the visions of my future 8-year-old’s debut in Carnegie Hall faded away.

A few months later I spoke with Anna Gold, a widely respected music teacher in Nevada City who has a master’s in education from Harvard and is an accomplished piano and cello player and teacher. She has taught music to children for more than four decades, and she told me that for most children, it is actually better to wait to start an instrument until they are 8 or 9 years old. Anna started playing cello when she was 9, and she said she quickly caught up with other kids who had been playing since they were 3. Why? Because she already knew how to read music, understood it, and could speak its language. She knew how to make music; she just needed to learn the mechanics of the instrument itself.

It is so easy to forget that musical instruments are just that, a tool to express the music inside you. It is easy to think of the instrument as the end, but it is a means.

Over the last five years, I have had the opportunity to nourish the musical growth of many children through my work teaching Music Together, a research-based early childhood music program for kids and their parents from birth to age 5. This is not a stressful, performance-based environment but rather a joyful and fun 45 minutes of singing, chanting, dancing and silliness. The goals of the program are to help children sing in tune and keep an accurate beat, which are the foundations of the language of music. If parents struggle in these areas, the class helps them, too! With these two skills, children can confidently participate in the music of our culture, whether it’s with their school band, church choir or a community program. Even if they never play a note, these skills enable them to have a much richer enjoyment of music.

Research shows how important music study can be to academic achievement, and so some achievement-oriented moms like me wondered if this playful class



How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Play.


BY BETH KELLEY GILLOGLY
PHOTOS BY KEITH SUTTER

is a cop-out. Isn’t it too much fun and not enough learning? Shouldn’t our young children really be taking lessons *now* and getting started early on the road to becoming a musician? Actually, this class is exactly the right step, the developmentally correct approach for young children. First of all, play IS a child’s work; play is when they learn the most. Most children are not ready—developmentally or physically—to focus on a lesson or to hold a violin and try to eek out some semblance of beautiful sound on its strings. One of the reasons lessons often frustrate kids is because it takes too long to get to the actual FUN of making music! As my friend Anna pointed out, she knew lots of young children who were essentially forced to learn an instrument and practice before they were ready, and they burned out before they really got started.

Instead, the first five years of life are the perfect time to show kids that music is fun and that they can make it! Seeing mom or dad having fun shaking eggs, stepping to the beat, singing out loud and making up songs inspires kids to do it, too. They discover they can create music themselves and that it is fun! Forcing my daughter to keep taking lessons and practice at age 2 would have mostly

shown her that music is work, without a lot of joy. The work and discipline of music is an important and good lesson, but one better left to an older child.

These days my daughter, now almost 7, makes up her own songs, sings all day long, dabbles on the piano, has started strumming my ukulele, and has written some of her own songs using rainbow-colored notes. She has seen me do all of these things, and has keyed into how absorbed and happy I am when I am doing them. It is a thrill to see her musical development, but I know I can’t be pushy about it.

The other day, she was playing piano and I excitedly jumped in and tried to teach her where to find C. She gave me a look—her little eyebrows raised—that said, “Back off.” “Right,” I thought, and I went back to the kitchen while listening to her plink out a new composition. She might still be headed to Carnegie Hall some day, or she might just make music to entertain herself. Either way is all right with me. 



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