

# Music and Play Pedagogies: How and Why They Belong in Every Classroom

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*Hanna Zimmerman*



TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the integration of music and play pedagogies in early childhood classrooms, with a specific focus on students with Down Syndrome. Through an observational study of Ms. Sarah's classroom, it demonstrates how these pedagogical strategies enhance student engagement, facilitate positive peer interactions, and improve classroom management. Music and play provide essential support in transitions, routines, and academic instruction, fostering an inclusive and developmentally appropriate learning environment.

The study highlights the effectiveness of music in reinforcing key academic concepts while also supporting social-emotional learning. Play-based activities encourage collaboration, problem-solving, and creativity, enabling students of all abilities to build essential cognitive and motor skills. Additionally, structured musical activities contribute to better behavioral regulation, aiding students in maintaining focus and reducing anxiety during classroom transitions.

By examining the role of music and play in both neurotypical and neurodivergent classrooms, this study underscores the importance of integrating these methods into teaching practices. Practical applications are provided to help educators implement these strategies effectively, ensuring that all students, regardless of ability, have access to meaningful, engaging, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences. The findings suggest that incorporating music and play into classroom instruction benefits all students by promoting self-expression, cooperation, and academic success, ultimately creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

## FRAMING AND CONTEXT

Ms. Sarah's classroom of four-year-olds with Down Syndrome is booming with the sounds of laughter and rich conversation as each child plays at various stations. The majority of the students are huddled around one particular station filled with alphabet shakers, tambourines, textured noise makers, and much more. Kayla shakes rattles made from everyday objects such as water bottles and beads. Troy clangs together bells, and Mason beats the drums. Each individual expresses themselves while simultaneously communicating with the world. Every child brings individuality, self-expression, and academic curiosity to the table at the music station.

The sound of Ms. Sarah's jingle bells causes students to stop and listen as if a conductor had silenced the band. Ms. Sarah sweetly sings "clean up, clean up, it is time to clean up, clean up." Once the classroom begins to resemble order, Ms. Sarah switches her tune: "Find your seat, walking feet, I can walk right to my seat." The children sit in their seats ready to learn. Instead of a shouted command or thunderous clapping sequence, the use of a soft, sweet song brings order to the classroom and each student to their seat in good spirits, academically primed for the day's lessons.

Ms. Sarah's classroom is an example of how music and play can enhance the classroom and sponsor academic advancements simultaneously. After observing Ms. Sarah's classroom, it is evident that music and play can be exceptionally powerful in early childhood classrooms, especially for those with special needs. This article highlights the scientific reasoning behind the benefits of music and play in the lives of young children and how these pedagogies can foster positive interactions in the classroom and emphasize developmentally appropriate practice. This article explores music and play pedagogies as a medium through which teachers maximize developmentally appropriate practice and teach all students effectively in any classroom. The article concludes by offering practical applications of music and/or play pedagogies in neurotypical and neurodivergent classrooms.

This article strives to benefit teachers in both neurotypical and neurodivergent classrooms. It illustrates how teachers can use music and play pedagogies to elicit positive interactions with students and facilitate positive peer-to-peer interactions, all while affirming the students in the classroom. Music and play pedagogies belong in every classroom because they demonstrate how to use developmentally appropriate practice in a meaningful way, and they emphasize inclusion and positive classroom interactions overall.

## UNDERSTANDING MUSIC AND PLAY PEDAGOGUES

Music and play pedagogies are meaningful communication tools for all young children. Children are far more engaged when either of these pedagogies is utilized. Developmentally appropriate practice challenges teachers to nurture students' basic needs, create a positive and healthy classroom environment, and teach academic content and appropriate age-level skills (Copple and Bredekamp 2021). By maximizing music and play pedagogies, teachers incorporate developmentally appropriate practice into each aspect of the instructional day.

### Play Pedagogy in All Early Childhood Classrooms

An observational study was conducted in a lab school for students with Down Syndrome, ages birth to eight years, and neurotypical students, monitoring students' interaction with peers, academic content, and developmental skills through the medium of music and play pedagogies. Play can be interpreted in many different ways, but for the purpose of this article, play refers to incorporating academic or developmental content into a play experience (Hamilton and Wood 2020). Play pedagogies can be implemented in numerous ways throughout the classroom with a variety of purposes. Two main integrations, developmental play and academic play, will be discussed at length.

Integrating developmentally appropriate skills, tasks, and play positively affects students at all stages of development (Copple and Bredekamp 2021). For example, students use teacher-student games to develop functional skills such as chewing or tolerating various textures in the mouth - a common struggle for students with neurological disabilities. By integrating play pedagogies, this skill is developed effectively with little stress or anxiety. When it is time for students to perform oral motor therapy in Ms. Sarah's classroom, students have a set number of exercises to complete, such as blowing whistles with various levels of difficulty or combing textured oral swabs throughout a student's mouth in order to desensitize the cheek and tongue. Ms. Sarah sets the timer to measure the duration of oral motor therapy for students and tells them when it is finished. Students then compete with that time the next day in an attempt to achieve temporal improvement while still participating in all other daily exercises. In this manner, oral motor therapy is completed while enjoying positive interaction with the teacher. Students receive all of the benefits of oral motor therapy, but it is transformed into a lighthearted and engaging activity by integrating play pedagogies.

Academic concepts and play have been integrated into classrooms and facilitated through math games, Jeopardy spin-offs, and charades for years; but using play to ensure that all students receive the benefit is more challenging. All young students can explore a variety of

academic topics through centers of play. Creating time for student-directed exploration is one of the most powerful tools a teacher can use to incorporate play into academic content. Integrating a letter-of-the-week station, where all the items in the station begin with the week's letter, allows the students to engage with the letter in a meaningful and challenging way. The students apply their knowledge of the letter of the week when identifying the items in the station and utilize discovery as the method of instruction. Another station in the classroom could invite students to draw the week's letter with various materials. Offering students a beginning handwriting station with developmentally appropriate markers, crayons, pens, paint, or glitter allows the students to express themselves while engaging in academic content. The students' expertise in the week's letter continues to grow, and play pedagogies ensure that all students participate and learn. Play pedagogies do not lower expectations in the classroom; they simply shift the medium through which academic content is presented and explored in the classroom in order to ensure all students remain engaged and continue learning in a manner that is suitable to them.

### Building Relationships with Music

Students in Ms. Sarah's class have much higher levels of success following directions when music is the medium through which the directions are administered. At the lab school, all directions and tasks are sung to students. Music activates a different area of the brain than talking or listening to regular speech (McCollum 2019). Using singing to give directions evokes noticeably different responses than when directions are given in a regular tone of voice. Changing the way the teacher gives the instructions improves the way students respond, which in turn creates more opportunities for positive student-teacher interactions.

Students with neurological disabilities interpret the world around them in a much different way than children without them. Therefore, the teacher must adjust the environment around the students to ensure the desired outcomes. Music is an excellent way to modify the classroom environment. By shifting the teacher's voice to one that is musical, students listen with a different area of their brain, which has the potential to positively transform any classroom (McCollum 2019). When a teacher sings their instructions in a format that is familiar to students, the action being requested of the students becomes automatic. For example, in a classroom with young children, this song may be helpful:

Everybody find your spot,  
Find your spot, find your spot.  
Everybody find your spot, and  
Sit, sit right down.

This song has been used in classrooms of young children who are neurotypical and neurodivergent. The students are familiar with the format of the song, which allows it to be manipulated into other instructions such as:

Find your seat, find your seat

Everybody find your seat.

It is time, for, snack.

Everybody find your seat

It is time, for, snack.

The students notice the differences in the lyrics of the song and recognize that when the teacher is singing with that specific rhythm and tone, it is time to listen. The students become attuned to the lyrics of the instructional songs and comprehend the differences in instructions. Therefore, the teacher must be consistent with their diction. In the example, the students understand that their spot is their place on the carpet, and their seat is their chair at the table. Small nuances such as these dictate the success of the instructional songs and can transform a classroom of students who do not follow instructions into one where students listen well, and teacher-student interactions are positive and productive.

## INCORPORATING MUSIC WITH PLAY PEDAGOGIES

Integrating content areas is often a concern or source of stress for many teachers, but it creates unmatched opportunities within the classroom. Music and play pedagogies may be implemented in the classroom in a variety of ways. These two pedagogies transform large group instruction, transitions, and routines, as well as classroom management throughout each part of the traditional classroom day. Integrating music and play pedagogies into any classroom can ease frustrations, change the classroom climate, and improve student-teacher dynamics.

In this section, play pedagogies mainly refer to the physical movements, hand gestures, and dances that often accompany many of the song elements included in musical pedagogies illustrated below (Hamilton and Wood 2020).

### Large Group

When considering large group instruction that integrates music and play pedagogies, teachers must consider attention to meaning when crafting the lesson. Attention to meaning simply refers to the notion that teachers must consider the standards or academic content they wish to teach during the lesson (Deans for Impact 2021). When planning a thoughtful and integrated learning experience for all children in the classroom, a teacher must consider whether the lesson emphasizes the academic meaning identified in the lesson objective and/or standards. This is one evaluative measure that can be used to ensure an integrated lesson with music and play maintains sufficient academic significance.

Another manner in which teachers can ensure an integrated lesson is meaningful and carries academic weight is to ask the question coined by Dr. Michelle Bauml, “Is it cute or does it count?” This question invites teachers to examine the content covered in a lesson, not just the surface features (Bauml 2015). “Is it cute or does it count” dives deeply into the misconceptions and missteps that are often present in elementary classrooms. Many teachers believe that lessons must be “cute” or result in a glittery piece of construction paper. This is simply not true. Elementary teachers have the opportunity to create powerful integrated lessons and learning activities when music and play pedagogies are considered, and all evaluative measures are taken to ensure academic rigor is present.

One example of using music and play pedagogies in a large group setting is outlined below. The goal of the lesson could be to review, practice, and/or introduce the names and values of coins. This lesson is intended for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms, but it could also be used to review the content in an upper elementary classroom. The lesson

integrates academic content of coins and their names, music pedagogies of song and rhythm, and modeled play pedagogies of call and answer. An example lesson plan is shown below:

Coin Names and Values	
Objective	Students will review and practice the names and values of coins by participating in music pedagogy with an interactive song and demonstrating understanding with play pedagogy of call and response.
Materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Song lyrics</li> <li>• Anchor chart and/or visual representation of coins</li> <li>• Lyric support for students if necessary.</li> </ul>
Song	<p>Coin names and values are sung to the tune of the popular nursery rhyme, <i>Cobbler, Cobbler</i>.</p> <p>Sing together:</p> <p>Penny penny, easily spent copper brown and worth one cent. Nickel, nickel thick and fat You're worth five cents! I know that. Dime dime little and thin. I remember you're worth ten. Quarter quarter big and bold. You're worth twenty-five I'm told.</p> <p>Call and Answer:</p> <p>Penny, nickel, dime, quarter. What's your value I do wonder? Let's learn them now to and fro. From smallest to largest go, go, go. Penny 1, Nickel 5, Dime 10, Quarter 25</p>
Play	<p>Students model various movements throughout the song to represent various items.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Penny is shown through a sign language p</li> <li>• Nickel is shown through a sign language n</li> <li>• Dime is shown through a sign language d</li> <li>• Quarter is shown through a sign language q</li> <li>• "I remember" or "I know" is modeled through pointing at the head or brain.</li> <li>• "What's your value?" is modeled through a shrugging motion, arms bent at the elbows, and palms up</li> </ul>

	Motions can be added, changed, or modified to meet the needs of the students in the classroom.
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### Transitions and Routines

Transitions and routines are another source of stress and wasted time for many teachers. Instructional days never have enough minutes for teachers to ensure all material is covered. Incorporating music and play pedagogies into this portion of the everyday classroom expectations can help alleviate the anxiety associated with transitions and classroom routines.

Transitions create an opportunity for chaos, lack of order, lost instructional time, and large amounts of teacher frustration. To help make this task more manageable, teachers can use music and play pedagogies to set expectations for students, transition quickly, and maintain student focus. Once classroom transition expectations are established utilizing music and play pedagogies, consistent implementation provides stability throughout the school year. Using music and play pedagogies sets a foundation for student behavior, time limits for a task, and performance expectations at each new station. The students become familiar with the transition songs, allowing them to use the songs as a self-monitoring tool to ensure each transition is effective and efficient.

Many teachers incorporate various check-ins or daily constants in students' everyday lives, such as a morning meeting. These routines often feature class discussions such as the weather, how many students are in class today, or a weekly theme such as a letter or number of the week. Teachers can capitalize on the opportunity to include music and play pedagogies in this section of the day by setting the discussion to a tune. The consistency provided by a morning meeting song allows all students to be involved, creates a dependable plan for student learning, and ensures that expectations for the routines are always clear and achievable (Ormrod and Jones 2023).

The key to using music and play pedagogies in transitions and routines is to ensure that the expectations for all students are clear, developmentally appropriate, and consistent throughout the school year. Music and play pedagogies are tools for success in these areas, but they may only be influential in the classroom if they are maintained and enforced consistently. Music and modeling play pedagogies help keep students on task, focused, and reminded of the expectations as well as ease teacher stress, frustration, and anxiety that is often associated with these areas. Below are examples of how teachers can integrate music and play pedagogies into their transitions and routines.

Transitions, Routines, and Classroom Management	
Lining Up	<p>Sung to the tune of Pop, Lock, and Drop It.</p> <p>Pop, lock, and stop it That's it, no more talking I hope you remember all...the rules for the hall We walk quietly quietly Shh Shh We walk quietly quietly Shh Shh Shh</p> <p>This song can be accompanied by making an "X" with students' arms to show "stop it" and "no more talking," pointing to the head or brain to show that the students "remember all... the rules for the hall," and a finger on the mouth to show each time "Shh" is said.</p>
Morning Meeting	<p>Sung to the tune of the nursery rhyme, "Row, Row, Row, Your Boat"</p> <p>What's the weather, what's the weather, What's the weather like today? Is it rainy? Is it sunny? Is it cloudy out today? *Send student to check the weather* *Student name* what's the weather like today? Is it rainy? Is it sunny? Is it cloudy out today? *Student answers* It is *answer*! It is *answer*! It is *answer* out today! Thank you *student*! Thank you *student*!</p> <p>This song can be sung easily in sign language to ensure that all students are engaged and can be adapted to other aspects of morning meetings such as how many friends are in class today.</p>

### Classroom Management

Classroom management is challenging in neurotypical and neurodivergent elementary classrooms. By incorporating music and play pedagogies in various aspects of classroom management, teachers transform the dreaded task and improve the classroom community. Typical classroom management techniques range from ignoring the behavior to distracting the student with something else in the classroom. Redirecting students using a traditional method may confuse students, leave them not understanding what they did wrong, and not give them any opportunity to improve (Feeney, Moravick, and Nolte 2021). On the other hand, shifting to a well-known classroom melody redirects the students in a way that is meaningful to them, suggests what the student could do better, and reminds the rest of the students of the classroom expectations.

Regaining control of a noisy classroom is a daunting task for many teachers. Traditionally, teachers use mediums such as a clapping series, call-back routine, teacher

shouting, and many other snappy or harsh methods. By using music and play, the teacher shifts from a rigid method to one that demonstrates kindness, care, and respect for the students. This shift sponsors positive student-teacher interactions throughout the day. Using play and music pedagogies to regain control of the classroom and focus student attention fosters an environment of mutual respect between the students and teachers, creates a focused learning environment, and meets the basic needs of the students (Ormrod and Jones 2023). Below is a table with example classroom management techniques that could be applied to any teacher’s classroom, neurotypical or neurodivergent.

<p>Redirecting Students</p>	<p>Sung to the tune of the nursery rhyme, She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain.</p> <p>Please be patient, wait your turn, and raise your hand  Please be patient, wait your turn, and raise your hand  When someone else is talking and you feel like interrupting  Please be patient, wait your turn, and raise your hand</p> <p>This song is often accompanied by modeling raising your hand and putting a finger over your mouth to demonstrate being patient.</p>
<p>Regaining Control of the Classroom</p>	<p>Sung to the tune of the nursery rhyme, Brother John.</p> <p>Hello, Hello  Class, Class  Zip your lips, Zip your lips  Respect, Respect  Teacher’s talking, teacher’s talking  I am listening, I am listening</p> <p>The students often join the teacher when singing “I am listening, I am listening.”</p>

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, observing Ms. Sarah's classroom, researching music and its effect on the human brain, and considering play pedagogies have shown how powerful a music-and-play-pedagogy-integrated classroom can be. Music activates a part of the brain that fosters a different type of reasoning and information processing, which in turn produces different results in the classroom. Pairing the power of music pedagogy with play methods integrates these pedagogies into large group instruction, transitions, routines, and classroom management.

Throughout the observational study, the themes of consistency and meaningfulness are apparent. Teachers can ease large amounts of stress and frustration in their classrooms by changing the way they present information to students. Teachers can create meaningful lessons and develop consistent classroom procedures, transitions, and routines by incorporating music and play into their classrooms. A small adjustment in the tone of voice and medium through which directions and instructions are delivered can have a substantial impact on the classroom community, student learning, and engagement, as well as the success of teacher-directed activities.

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