

*This tip sheet, developed in conjunction with MacPhail Center for Music, introduces how music in the classroom can be used to support emotional regulation and co-regulation in young children. Music can help build a foundation for young children to self-regulate their emotions, which in turn will equip them to self-regulate their bodies, behaviors, and movements.*

## RECALL IT

The ***Introducing It: Executive Function and Self-Regulation Development in Young Children*** Tip Sheet introduced the following concepts:

- **Executive function** is a term encompassing a set of skills that allow people to control their own behavior and direct it towards longer-term goals, rather than what is automatic or easiest to do.
- **Co-regulation** is a critical support offered by trusted adults through which a child can learn to self-regulate. Within an established and trusting relationship, a child can “borrow” the trusted person’s calm to assist them in returning to their own state of calm, or regulation.<sup>1</sup>

Music is a part of every world culture.<sup>2</sup> Many children naturally respond to music. It is a fun, engaging experience that is innately a part of children’s lives from the very beginning—even when they are in the womb.<sup>3</sup> Music is all around us: birds sing, the wind whistles, children clap or stomp, cars honk. Music can also be a powerful tool to support children in acquiring the skills that make up executive function and self-regulation.

All human beings can experience music. Music’s components are not limited to those that we can hear. Our bodies can feel rhythm through vibrations.

## HOW MUSIC INTEGRATION SUPPORTS EMOTIONAL REGULATION AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

We all need to be able to regulate our emotions in order to control our responses and behaviors. Young children with strong emotional regulation skills have an easier time transitioning to kindergarten.<sup>4</sup> Music is one tool that adults may use to help children develop those skills.

**Music integration** is the method by which music is incorporated into new or existing classroom activities. Musical activities should be meaningful additions that engage young children, impact their learning experiences, and enhance classroom climate. This teaching strategy is the focus of MacPhail’s Learning with Music teaching approach.<sup>5</sup>

Music integration offers children opportunities to experience positive emotions as well as building skills that lead to feelings of success.<sup>6</sup> Young children experiencing poverty and other stressors may particularly benefit from arts programming.<sup>7 8 9</sup> A study of two different Head Start programs, one of which integrated the arts, found that children enrolled in the arts-integrated program showed greater gains in school readiness.<sup>6</sup>

## CO-REGULATION, SELF-REGULATION, AND FOCUS

Arts programming offers opportunities to learn and practice emotional regulation skills.<sup>10 11</sup> In fact, many caregivers instinctively co-regulate with music, soothing a child who is upset through rhythmic rocking and gentle singing or humming. As polyvagal theory suggests (see sidebar), lullabies—or any preferred song sung in a lullaby-like manner<sup>2</sup>—may convey a sense of safety. When they feel grounded, children are better able to focus and learn, and adults have fewer big behaviors to manage, such as loud voices, stomping, throwing toys, or exuberant movements that work on the playground but not in the classroom.<sup>12</sup> (See also the discussion of classroom transitions below.) There is also evidence that the simple act of identifying our emotions can help us differentiate between them and regulate them.<sup>13</sup>

### POLYVAGAL THEORY

Polyvagal theory is an idea developed by neuroscientist Stephen Porges. Its name comes from the vagus nerve, which is part of our autonomic nervous system. That's the same system that regulates our heart rate, breathing, and other processes that we don't have to think about.

According to polyvagal theory, our brains subconsciously scan our environment for signs of safety or danger. We look for cues in facial expressions, vocal tone, eye contact, and hand gestures. When we feel unsafe, our fight-flight-freeze instincts are activated. When we feel safe, we can be open to other people and build relationships.<sup>14</sup> Music can be used to enhance a sense of safety and calm.<sup>15</sup>



## WAYS TO INTEGRATE MUSIC INTO EARLY EDUCATION

While music is enriching as a standalone activity, it can also be incorporated in classrooms to build young children's skills in regulating their emotions, bodies, behaviors, and movements. This, in turn, prepares their brains to learn and grow.

- **PLAY:** Like other animals, humans learn through play, and music provides plenty of opportunities for fun, playfulness, and social interaction.<sup>16</sup> Musical experiences also encourage creativity. Interactive songs like "The Hokey-Pokey" and "Vengan a Ver Mi Granja" as well as musical chairs or other start-and-stop games can get children moving, thinking, and laughing.
- **RHYTHM:** Rhythm is a key part of music. Hearing the rhythm of a parent's heartbeat in the womb may even help lay the foundation for our development of hearing and language.<sup>17</sup> Hearing a steady beat can help groups of people coordinate their actions. When listening to music, people sometimes synchronize their movements with the beat. For example, a jogger might listen to music with a fast tempo to maintain their speed. Music with a steady beat can help children and adults co-regulate and transition more easily from one task to another.<sup>18</sup> There is even evidence tying rhythm perception to literacy development.<sup>19</sup>

## DEFINING IT

### Emotional regulation

Is the ability to control and regulate one's emotional responses to stressors

### Co-regulation

Is a critical support offered by trusted adults through which a child can learn to self-regulate. Within an established and trusting relationship a child can "borrow" the trusted person's calm to assist them in returning to their own state of calm, or regulation

### Music integration

Is the method by which musical activities are incorporated into existing or new activities

## DIVING INTO IT

### For additional information on this topic,

Check out the Sing, Play, Learn with MacPhail® program: [macphail.org/learning-with-music](https://macphail.org/learning-with-music)

Read CEED's blog post on supporting young children's development with music: [ceed.umn.edu/beyond-the-cleanup-song-supporting-young-childrens-development-with-music](https://ceed.umn.edu/beyond-the-cleanup-song-supporting-young-childrens-development-with-music)

Please visit CEED's website: [ceed.umn.edu](https://ceed.umn.edu)

- **SINGING:** Singing requires long, controlled breaths which can promote relaxation and reduce stress—a technique often used in yoga and meditation. Singing together may assist in co-regulation.<sup>18</sup> Singing about feelings can help children identify and label emotions.<sup>11 18 20</sup> Musical activities can involve acting out emotions so children may experience them visually and physically.
- **TRANSITIONS:** Transitioning from one activity to another can often be difficult for young children. In a group setting, the intentional use of music can provide a foundation for co-regulation by establishing a shared objective and encouraging everyone's cooperation. As an example, songs familiar to the children in the group can be used to facilitate transitions between activities or to help the group focus on a task like putting away toys.<sup>21</sup>
- **MOVEMENT:** MacPhail's Learning with Music program invites participants to explore different emotions by acting them out, which can help children recognize what they are feeling or what others may be feeling. The song "If You're Happy and You Know It" can be adapted to represent different feelings that we all experience.<sup>22</sup> For example, adults can encourage children to stomp their feet if they are angry, spin around or wiggle if they are excited, or hide if they are scared. Children can suggest other feelings and ways to act them out, too.

## REFERENCES

The sources referenced in this tip sheet can be found at [ceed.umn.edu/tip-sheet-music-and-emotion-regulation/#intromusicrefs](https://ceed.umn.edu/tip-sheet-music-and-emotion-regulation/#intromusicrefs)

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