

This tip sheet, developed in conjunction with MacPhail Center for Music, shares ideas for how to integrate music to help children focus and learn to control their behavior through supporting the development of inhibitory control, an executive function skill.

RECALL IT

The ***Introducing It: How Music Integration Supports Inhibitory Control Development in Young Children*** tip sheet introduced the following concepts:

- **Inhibitory control** is a key component of executive function.² It can be defined as “the ability to exercise voluntary control over our reactions and behaviors.”³
- **Executive function** is a set of brain-based 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.
- **Music integration** is a method by which music is incorporated into new or existing activities. Musical activities should be meaningful additions that engage children, impact their learning experiences, and enhance the classroom climate. This teaching strategy is the focus of MacPhail’s Learning with Music teaching approach.⁴

Music is a valuable addition to the classroom in its own right, bringing fun and novelty to everyday routines.

- Music can be a helpful tool to redirect children’s attention.
- Music is accessible; people of all ages and abilities can appreciate it.
- Music with a strong rhythm is grounding.¹
- Music is fun!

TRY IT OUT!

Inhibitory control is a skill that we learn gradually from infancy through adolescence⁵ or young adulthood.

- Don’t be afraid to be musical with young children. If you feel uncomfortable singing, start by chanting a favorite rhyme. Sing when you are ready.
- Remember that young children will not judge you on whether or not you are a great singer. They just want to hear you sing and make music with you!
- Young children love learning through movement, so add movements to your chants and songs. This will enhance focus, self-regulation, and learning.

With **INFANTS**, caregivers can:

- Add music to regular predictable routines such as feeding, napping, bath time, etc. Sing a familiar song or make up new words to sing to a favorite tune. Look for eye contact with babies to show they are engaged.
- Create the sensation of a steady beat by gently tapping on an infant’s hands or the bottoms of their feet. You can even try a gentle massage in a rhythmic circular motion, which may help infants regulate their emotions.
- Hold an infant and rock or sway in time with a recording of a lullaby or other gentle music.

Inhibitory control is especially difficult for toddlers, as they are creatures of routine and it's hard for them to go against their predispositions or expectations. Music is a great tool to help ease both routines and adjustments to routines. It also offers opportunities to practice inhibitory control.

With TODDLERS and PRESCHOOLERS, caregivers can:

- Practice making noise and stopping. Have children clap out a steady beat or use a drum, sticks, shaker, or other noise-maker. Create a hand signal to let children know when they should stop.
- Practice moving and stopping with the song "Stop and Go" by Ella Jenkins: "Oh well, you walk and you walk and you walk and you stop." Repeat! Then try tapping and stopping, clapping and stopping, spinning and stopping, etc. Make sure to spin in both directions to reduce dizziness. If a child gets dizzy, have them jump up and down a few times to recenter their bodies in space.
- Listen and move to a favorite recording. Then stop the music and tell children to freeze. Stopping and starting will build anticipation; children will listen for the words "Stop," "Freeze," and "Start." When they match their actions to the words, they're practicing inhibitory control in a fun, active way.
- Use body percussion to help children focus when transitioning from one space to another. It will help children resist the urge to run away from the group. Clap or rub hands, tap knees, stomp feet, or march in place.

Personalize the lyrics:

Come up with a chant that describes what you are doing: "March, march, march your feet, keep them steady and slow/March, march, march your feet, everyone is ready, LET'S GO!" You can even sing your chant to a tune that is familiar to the children in your care.

- De-escalate challenging scenarios. When they are experiencing big feelings, children have an especially hard time with inhibitory control. When children start having a hard time sharing, playing together, or using safe hands and feet—or whenever they are starting to act on unhelpful impulses—music can help.

Use coordinated rhythm to refocus the group:

Ask children in an excited voice, "Can you keep the beat in your feet?" Start stomping your feet in a regular rhythm. Children will start to join in. Use different body parts: "Can you keep the beat in your *hands*?" Once you have the attention of the group, continue stomping, clapping, jumping, etc. to help them refocus. Then sing another transition to the next activity.

Use song to help children remember:

Sing about cleaning up toys, not hitting our friends, washing hands and so on. Use tunes that are familiar to the children in your care and change the words. For example, try singing "Keep your hands to yourself, to yourself" to the tune of "If You're Happy and You Know It."

- Adapt on the fly. Make your own music with your voice, body percussion, or simple noise-makers. That way, you can make the music fit the situation. Pre-recorded music can be used in a pinch, but children may tune it out after a while. Live music and movement will always outweigh pre-recorded music.

Don't be afraid to make mistakes!

Don't be shy about using music as a tool even if you don't have a musical background. Put yourself out there and sing with children. You will be surprised at how quickly you can grab their attention. Keep things simple. Be confident. Be brave! Laugh off your mistakes. And have fun with your young musicians!

DIVING INTO IT

For additional information on this topic:

Don't miss the companion Tip Sheet, *Introducing It: How Music Integration Supports Inhibitory Control Development in Young Children*: z.umn.edu/music-inhibitory

Download more music Tip Sheets from CEED and MacPhail:

- *Introducing It: The Benefits of Music Integration to Emotional Regulation Development in Young Children*: z.umn.edu/music-regulation
- *Applying It: Engaging in Musical Play with Young Children*: z.umn.edu/music-play

Check out the Sing, Play, Learn with MacPhail® program: 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

Ella Jenkins' "Stop and Go" is a perfect song for practicing inhibitory control with young children: z.umn.edu/stopandgo

The Oregon Symphony offers a Symphony Storytime on YouTube. Check out "Your Name Is a Song," featuring percussion instruments: z.umn.edu/yournameisasong

Please visit CEED's website: ceed.umn.edu

REFERENCES

The sources referenced in this tip sheet can be found at z.umn.edu/inhibitrefs.

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Applying it: Helping young children practice inhibitory control with music. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota.