

*This Tip Sheet, developed in conjunction with MacPhail Center for Music, gives ideas for using music in the classroom to help with emotional regulation and co-regulation in young children.*

## RECALL IT

The ***Introducing It: The Benefits of Music Integration to Emotional Regulation Development in Young Children*** Tip Sheet introduced the following concepts:

- **Music integration** is a method by which music is incorporated into new or existing activities.
- **Emotion 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.

To learn, children need to be able to manage their emotions. Living in a stressful environment— for example, living with the effects of poverty, racism, or similar conditions— can make that more difficult. In the early childhood classroom, music can be a tool for promoting calm and focus, as well as smoothing transitions. Music programming can also include opportunities for practicing self-regulation.

## MUSICAL PLAY WITH CHILDREN

A good first step towards self-regulation is to help children recognize what they are feeling. MacPhail Teaching Artist Amanda Breininger says that **"music is a great way to express our feelings and add language to our feelings."**<sup>1</sup>

### ***Get comfortable being silly:***

When engaging in musical play with children, it's important not to take yourself too seriously. Let the children in your care be your guide: they will often sing, dance, hum, and share freely. Don't be afraid to make mistakes. Keep things simple, be confident, and be brave!

## TRY IT OUT!

Here are some key ways to support children's developing ability to self-regulate at different ages.

### **With INFANTS, caregivers can:**

- Rock or sway in time with a recording of a lullaby or other gentle music.
- Sing nonsense syllables (la la la, dee dee dee), one-syllable words, or a favorite vocalization (meow, beep, or baby's latest favorite sound) to a familiar tune.
- Involve sensory exploration beyond listening to sounds. Visual tracking activities and exploring texture and movement can be part of the experience.

***Sensory exploration beyond listening:***

Infants can watch you use egg shakers or other noisemakers, wave sensory scarves or play silks, or move finger puppets or other toys in all directions. Let them touch, handle, and play with the materials, too.

- Use songs with gestures as a way to promote learning in various areas.

***A tip from MacPhail:***

Sing, Play, Learn with MacPhail® uses the [“Finger Family” song](#) in their curriculum to promote vocal exploration, visual tracking, body awareness, and object permanence with children at many stages of development.<sup>1</sup>



**With TODDLERS, caregivers can:**

- “Warm up” your vocal cords with humming or other vocalizations (nonsense syllables, animal sounds, or other silly sounds work well).
- Provide opportunities to create and improvise with vocalizations, sounds, instruments, and movements. Imitate what children do and integrate their ideas into your activities.
- Use contrasting sounds and movements: clap, jump or stomp quickly then slowly, loudly then quietly.
- Provide opportunities to move in a steady beat pattern: jump, stomp, march, rock, bounce.
- Add songs and chants to any play activity—playing with cars (make car sounds), building with blocks (sing high/sing low), and so on.
- Dance with [sensory scarves or play silks](#).

- Add body percussion (clap, slap knees, tap feet) or shakers, hand drums, etc. to help children internalize rhythm.
- Bring out stuffed animals or dolls so children can pretend to help the toys co-regulate through movement and music.
- Invite children to “act out” emotions through facial expressions and movement.
- Sing a song or chant about feelings.

***Try the following lyrics sung to the tune of ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star:***

I have feelings, so do you.  
Let’s all sing about a few.  
We get happy, we get sad.  
We get scared, we get mad.  
I am proud of being me.  
That’s a feeling, too, you see.<sup>2</sup>

- De-escalate big behaviors by getting children’s attention with music, then add big body movements to a favorite song or chant: stretching, stomping, jumping and spinning are good options. Or tell children to give themselves a big bear hug.

**With PRESCHOOLERS, caregivers can:**

- Try using a [Hoberman sphere](#) toy. Breathe in and out as the sphere is opened and closed. Add vocalizations to make it a musical experience.
- Listen to recorded music while painting or coloring, during transitions, etc.
- Sit in a circle and toss a ball to one another in time to a musical beat.
- Play recorded music and let children accompany the music with instruments. Don’t direct them—let them do what feels and sounds good to them.

- Ask individual children to take turns creating a musical pattern (clapping out a rhythm, singing a few notes or a vocalization) and have everyone copy them.
- Sing about what's happening or what's about to happen in your classroom, adding your own words to a familiar tune.

**Change the lyrics to the folk song  
"The Farmer in the Dell" to fit a situation:**  
"We're walking down the hall..."  
"We're putting on our coats..."

- If possible, add a classroom "music center" where children can explore musical instruments like egg shakers, sticks, drums, bells, kazoos, or castanets during free play times. Or add these instruments to other classroom areas.<sup>3</sup>
- Get the children involved in making instruments for your classroom collection.

Fill containers or cardboard rolls (capped at both ends) with dry rice, beans, or beads to make shakers. Stretch rubber bands over a shoebox to make an instrument with strings to pluck.

- Use music to aid in problem solving or conflict resolution.

Pick a favorite tune and make up words to fit the situation, like the Daniel Tiger songs "[What Do You with the Mad that You Feel?](#)" or "[Saying I'm Sorry Is the First Step.](#)"

## REFERENCES

The sources referenced in this tip sheet can be found at [ceed.umn.edu/tip-sheet-musical-play-with-young-children/#applymusicrefs](https://ceed.umn.edu/tip-sheet-musical-play-with-young-children/#applymusicrefs)

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### For additional information on this topic:

Download **Introducing It: The Benefits of Music Integration to Emotional Regulation Development in Young Children:**  
[z.umn.edu/music-regulation](https://z.umn.edu/music-regulation)

Find suggested activities and more information at  
[macphail.org/read-watch-listen](https://macphail.org/read-watch-listen)

A Music Together playlist features lullabies from several different cultures: [z.umn.edu/lullabies](https://z.umn.edu/lullabies)

Singer-songwriter José-Luis Orozco's recordings of Latin American children's songs are on YouTube: [z.umn.edu/decolores](https://z.umn.edu/decolores)

The PBS show Daniel Tiger features "strategy songs" that talk about experiences like feeling mad or separating from a caregiver:  
[pbskids.org/learn/lifes-little-lessons](https://pbskids.org/learn/lifes-little-lessons)

Search YouTube for songs about social-emotional concepts, like:

"That's a Boundary" by Hopscotch  
[z.umn.edu/thatsaboundary](https://z.umn.edu/thatsaboundary)

"Emotions" episode by the Storybots  
[z.umn.edu/storybotsemotions](https://z.umn.edu/storybotsemotions)

The book *Breathe Like a Bear* by Kira Willey shares ideas for mindfulness and breathing activities:  
[z.umn.edu/breathebear](https://z.umn.edu/breathebear)

Dynamic Music Room has many song and activity suggestions to explore for free:  
[dynamicmusicroom.com](https://dynamicmusicroom.com)

Visit our website at [ceed.umn.edu](https://ceed.umn.edu)