

Does My Child Have Musical Talent?

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In this day and age when professional parts often treat raisin their children with much the same diligence as they prepare legal briefs or write academic papers, the question arises, "Is my child musical? And should I be doing something about it?"

The first question might be phrased a different way, namely, are you, as parents, musical. Highly musical parents will probably be saying, "We play classical music all the time at home, he hears me practicing, his brother and sister both play, but why does this child seem to have no interest in music." In short, they expect that their child will be musical.

The far greater majority of parents fall into two categories: (1) those who played an instrument when they were a child but never continued to the point where they could enjoy playing as an adult, and (2) those who never played an instrument, but have always wished they had. Now they want to give this experience to their children, but wonder if their children will be more successful than they were. In short, is it worth the time, money and effort if Johnny really has no musical ability or talent?

The great surprise is that most children have musical ability. It is the rare child who is truly tone deaf (and there are those who claim that no child is tone deaf). Most children simply lack exposure to music. One does not expect a child who has never heard Japanese to have an easy time learning the language; yet the child who lives with Japanese being spoken in the home, even if it is never spoken to him/her, will end up understanding Japanese. The same is true with music. I have one child who can sing trumpet exercises, but does not play the trumpet; he simply has a brother who diligently practices within earshot.

Most schools now require parents to read to young children at least one half-hour per day, realizing that this has perhaps the greatest influence on whether or not a child becomes a reader. If you want to have an amateur musician, your child needs to listen to music every day. Play tapes in your car. Set aside a listening time when you can dance or

your few excuses to sing, and regardless of the fact that you probably do not sound like Leontyne Price or Pavarotti, you can have a wonderful time.

If your child sings many songs back to you, quickly learns all the words, requests that you put on music, he/she is probably musical.

Few music programs for children begin

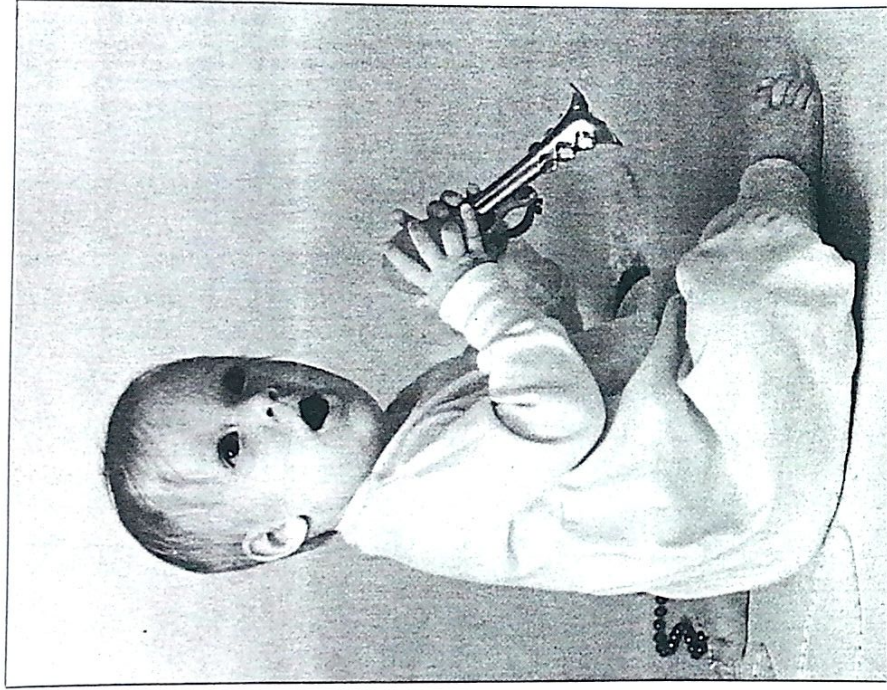


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for those under 2. Somewhere between ages 2 and 3, there are parent-child music programs. (See our Arts Guide in this issue.) These offer excellent opportunities for children to experience participating musically in a group and, after all, music by and large is a social experience. Suzuki violin programs begin at age 3. Remember that violins are among the very few instruments which are made in child sizes. Some piano can begin at

four.

If your child hates to practice, he/she is not unmusical; he/she is normal!

There are some concerts which are appropriate for the under 5 set: Raffi, Sesame Street, Washington Chamber Symphony's (WCS) Holiday Sing-Along, etc. Try the Baryshnikov video of *The Nutcracker* straight through before you try to take a child to a live performance. Remember: You want to have a good time too, and not be feeding your time bomb Cheerios as if you have just bought the company. By age 6, he/she should be ready for WCS's Concerts for Young People; but remember, under age children are turned away at the door.

If your child adores going to the ballet, he/she is probably musical.

The real truth is that the occasional child actually does have great musical ability. He/she will begin in a Suzuki violin program and suddenly will be far ahead of his classmates. He/she may also simply have incredible receptive powers for music, able to sing melodies after a single listening, for example. I have a child who can tell what level of a video game a child sitting across the aisle in an airplane is at simply by the music. Everywhere there is music he is hearing it and computing it much as I would French, German or Japanese. For him, music is a language, always audible and perpetually able to be recalled. Adding music for him is like turning a movie from black and white to Technicolor. He has told me that he is constantly hearing music in his head. But he is also a child who has listened to music his entire life, so it is not just genes.

If your child is not musical, he/she will let you know. But because so many children do have a basic love of music, I encourage you to expose your children to music. If you, as a parent, are supportive, only a few will be given up as musically hopeless, and the vast majority will be graced with a love of music for life.

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