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The side effects of music



If playing in a drum circle increases oxytocin and learning an instrument decreases aggression, what else might be possible?

DR DAWN ROSE

Within schools, learning an instrument is sometimes seen as a form of brain training. However, increasing a child's intelligence is only one aspect of development – and of providing a rounded education. While music may indeed 'make you smarter', encouraging students to learn an instrument may support other important aspects of their development too.

setting helps children develop the skills of co-ordination and planning and executing complex sequences. It also supports children's brain development by encouraging them to constantly monitor auditory, visual and tactile information all at the same time – no mean feat.

Health musicing

All this evidence points to the fact that engaging in music promotes wellbeing and positive mental health. It provides opportunities for meaningful interactions and the chance to accomplish something. It is the process that is important, and this is known as 'health musicing'. In this, people who don't identify as musicians can also benefit by working with musicians, through therapeutic song writing for example.

Social bonding

Playing music in a group and working towards something such as an end-of-term performance supports children's social skills. In fact, singing in a choir or playing

Investing in musical learning does require long-term support. Children often need help to learn how to gain pleasure from practising. However, if young people can be encouraged to enjoy the process of learning, it can help them to apply themselves in other areas. Back in 2012, the government set out its national plan for music and committed to providing all children with an instrument. Regardless of the success of this, local music hubs have been provided with extra funding to fulfil local needs – we just need to access them.

"All this evidence points to the fact that engaging in music promotes wellbeing and positive mental health"

in a drum circle even increases our oxytocin (a neuropeptide associated with social bonding).

Studies have shown that when children as young as four made music together, they became more co-operative and helpful, suggesting that music also supports the development of non-verbal communication skills. And, as we all know, being able to explore and regulate emotional behaviour is an important part of growing up. In our studies we asked parents and teachers to complete a questionnaire before a group of children began individual music lessons, and again after one year. Teachers reported that these children showed significantly lower levels of anxiety, while parents reported lower levels of aggression, even though there was no change during the first year of learning itself.

Considering whether a student has a particular musical 'talent' may be unhelpful, as it prevents us from thinking about the potential that involvement in music holds for all children, including those with the unnerving ability to hit the triangle at just the wrong time, every time. While it may be the case that if you practise for 10,000 hours you'll become a musical expert, what about children who practise and play for fun, but might never be described as, or aspire to be, musicians?

Fluid intelligence

On the cognitive front, there's evidence that learning music increases a child's 'fluid intelligence'. This involves skills such as problem solving, undoubtedly important if we want our children to develop flexible thinking. Playing an instrument also develops children's fine and gross motor skills, as well as helping them to understand the nature and consequence of the force they use (when they blow or strum, for example) – skills that sporty kids may pick up elsewhere.

Brain development

Learning an instrument in an individual



Dr Dawn Rose researches the psychology of music and dance at the University of Hertfordshire.

AGE 5-11

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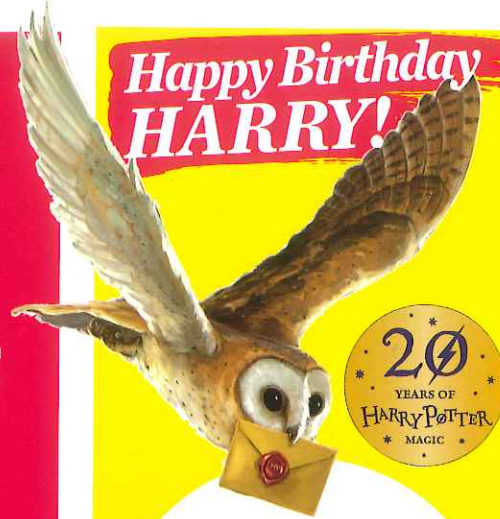
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