

Shake, Rattle, and Roll

**Rhythm
Instruments
and More for
Active Learning**

ABIGAIL FLESCH CONNORS, MEd



Shake, Rattle, and Roll

RHYTHM INSTRUMENTS AND
MORE FOR ACTIVE LEARNING

Abigail Flesch Connors



Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of my father, Rudolf Flesch, whose lifelong curiosity and creativity continue to inspire me every day.

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Gryphon House, Inc.
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ABIGAIL FLESCH CONNORS, MEd

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Introduction

**I would teach children music, physics,
and philosophy, but most importantly music;
for the patterns in music and all the arts
are the keys to learning.**

■ PLATO

You were not expecting to start with Greek philosophy, were you? Yet it is fitting; Plato knew what he was talking about. If there were such a thing as early learning in a box, it would be music. Music is math, because its rhythms, beats, melodies, and harmonies are all built from fractions, ratios, and proportions. Music is oral language and early literacy, because we sing songs with meaningful words structured in beginnings, middles, and endings, just like sentences and stories. Music is science, because to explore music is to explore sound, acoustics, physical properties of materials, force, velocity, volume, and mass. Music is culture and community, as we share traditional tunes and the joy of making music together. Music is about learning itself, constructing knowledge and being drawn by that knowledge into new paths of discovery and awareness. Music is the wonder of inventing, imagining, and creating—and expressing our unique selves.

**Children must have the opportunity to participate in
active music making. To listen to music without
the opportunity to engage actively in music production
is like hearing the language without the
opportunity to communicate with anyone else.**

■ CYNTHIA ENSIGN BANEY,

“Wired for Sound: The Essential Connection between Music and Development”

“Criss-cross applesauce.” “Fold your legs like a pretzel.” “Hold a bubble in your mouth.” If you are like most early childhood teachers, you have various tricks and techniques like these to get your class to settle down and be quiet. Do you ever wonder why we need these little tricks? It is because sitting down and being quiet is not a natural or comfortable state for young children. Young children are movers. They are runners and talkers and climbers and builders and jumpers and dancers and pretenders. They are not very good at sitting still, but they are excellent at playing.

Albert Einstein once said, “Play is the highest form of research.” When young children play, they have no agenda except a burning need to learn and grow. They learn about themselves, their bodies, their environment, the people around them, and the larger culture they live in. Realizing that play is how children learn has two implications for what we do in the classroom. First, play is an active process that involves children’s minds and bodies. Second, play is child centered and child led. Of course, this approach is not always practical or even possible, but we can and should give children opportunities to initiate and lead activities whenever we can. Most of the activities in this book are designed with this in mind.

In my music enrichment classes, whenever I announce that it is time to play instruments, the group erupts into an anticipatory chorus of *yays*, applause, and bouncing up and down. It took me a long time to figure out why young children respond so enthusiastically to the instruments. But after twenty years or so, I have a couple of hunches. Rhythm instruments are toys—at least in the eyes of young children. And they are the best kind of toys: completely open ended. There is no one right way to play a rhythm instrument; children will find a virtually infinite number of ways to play each one. This excites children’s curiosity and promotes problem solving—it is like a puzzle to think of new ways to make music with each instrument. Children are curious not only about the instruments themselves, but also about what they can do with the instruments. Young children love to pretend with instruments. Where you and I see a tambourine, they see a hat, a bowl to eat from, a steering wheel, a cake, a planet, and countless other things. Some teachers may see this instinctive pretending as a distraction from learning about music, but I have long been convinced that it is absolutely vital to acknowledge and respect children’s imaginations. Encouraging invention and creativity is an important charge for early childhood professionals. Most of the rhythm instrument activities you will find in this book allow for lots of active pretend play.

Moving to music is another uniquely effective way to inspire young children’s curiosity and creativity. As they move, they investigate the capabilities of their growing bodies. “How high can I stretch?” “How many ways can I move my wrists, my knees, my fingers?” “What shapes can I make with my arms?” They are curious about movement concepts, which they can explore freely through moving to different styles of music. Take the concepts of *heavy* and *light*. Children can learn about them through our words. They can understand more when they pick up heavy and light objects. And when they actually move like light snowflakes or heavy elephants, that understanding becomes solidly fixed in their muscle memory. Children are curious about exploring the space around them and how they can move through it.

Music brings out expressive, imaginative movements as young children are challenged to portray the sounds they hear and the emotions they feel. This is one reason I love to use recordings of classical music and music from cultures around the world when leading movement improvisation activities. Unfamiliar music requires thought and careful listening and inspires amazing, wholly new, and inventive movement.



Children are such curious creatures.

They explore, question, and wonder, and by doing so, learn.

From the moment of birth, likely even before, humans are drawn to new things. When we are curious about something new, we want to explore it.

And while exploring, we discover.

■ **DR. BRUCE D. PERRY,**

“Curiosity: The Fuel of Development”

How important is curiosity? Research has shown it to be a direct predictor of academic achievement. This is not surprising, yet many educational practices actually discourage curiosity. Recent studies indicate that direct instruction, or showing young children how to do something, results in children being less curious and less likely to discover new information. In other words, if I bring out an instrument and show children how to play it, they will generally follow my directions and play it the same way. However, think what will happen if I bring out the same instrument and act as a fellow learner, saying, “Hmm. Let’s see what I can do with this. If I bang it on the floor, do you think it will be loud? Let’s see. I wonder what it will sound like if I scratch it with my fingers. I’ll try it.” Then children have a very different reaction. When they take turns exploring the instrument, they will try all kinds of ways to handle it, hit it, roll it, and shake it. And almost always, I will learn new ways to create sound with the instrument that I had never thought of before.

When I first started teaching music to young children, I found their curiosity very annoying. There I would be, trying to introduce an activity using jingle bells, and all of a sudden a child would call out, “Hey, what is that inside the bells?” Other children would say, “I think it’s rocks.”

“No, it’s not! It’s little beads!” “It’s bowling balls!” Everyone had an opinion.

“Um, I think they’re little metal balls,” I’d say. “Now let’s get back to our song!” But by then it was too late—I had lost them. Half the children were peering intently into the bells, arguing heatedly (and loudly). I would watch helplessly as my lovely lesson plan flew out the window. I felt like a failure.

It took a while, but finally I caught on to the fact that young children’s curiosity is more than just an inconvenience to adults. Curiosity is the desire to learn. And early education is all about nurturing and inspiring that desire. When a child asks a question, we should celebrate. He wants to know something. Our job is to respond as well as we can—and lead him to ask even more questions. Playing rhythm instruments and using movement to express musical ideas encourages constant exploration and nurtures curious minds.

**It is the supreme art of the teacher
to awaken joy in creative expression and knowledge.**

■ **ALBERT EINSTEIN**

If curiosity is the *how* of learning, creativity is the *why*. We do not learn in order to have a head stuffed with information. We learn so that we can grow to take care of ourselves, take care of others, contribute to our communities, and help make a better world. All these things require creativity. Creativity is not just about the arts—although the arts are an important part of developing our creativity—it is also needed in medicine, law, science, engineering, business, farming, teaching, and raising families. Everything we do requires creative problem-solving skills and innovative thinking.

Young children are naturally bursting with creativity, and it is up to us to nurture it and help these creative children grow up to become creative adults. Playful, improvisational music activities like the ones in this book stretch imaginations and inspire unconventional, inventive responses. They are literally lessons in creativity.

How to Use This Book

Early childhood educators can now choose from a vast array of children's musical recordings. Many are excellent, and I use them frequently in my own classes. However, there is still a lack of resources for leading real live music experiences with young children. Many young children today believe that music is something that comes from electronic devices. It is so important for them to experience making music and inventing movements. The National Association for Music Education (NAfME, 2013) affirms that a music curriculum for young children should be based on play and "should include many opportunities to explore sound through singing, moving, listening, and playing instruments." The activities in this book provide dozens of these opportunities, and children respond with enthusiasm and ingenuity. They are empowered by the chance to contribute their own ideas to a group activity, and group cohesion and a sense of community are strengthened when children share creative ideas with each other. It is my hope that this book will be an everyday resource for early childhood professionals to inspire active musical exploration in their classrooms.

This is a book of handy, easy-to-use activities for various instruments, styles of movement, and tie-ins with seasons, holidays, and other themes. I encourage you to read the whole book through at least once, and here is the reason: You may not use every single activity right now,

but you will get ideas for activities to use with stories or in the future when your students are more focused, more physically coordinated, or better able to work together as a group.

I also hope you will use these activities as a jumping-off point to create your own activities—no one knows your class as well as you do! You know what they can do together as a group right now and what might challenge them. You know what excites them, what calms them, and what intrigues them. Enjoy these activities—and invent your own ideas—and use them to bring more music, curiosity, and creativity to your classroom.

PART ONE:

Rhythm Instrument Activities

Remember when you were four months old? I mean four months after conception, back in your mother's womb? Well, I wish you could, because that was a really exciting time in your life! That was when you were first able to hear. Hearing was the first of your senses to kick in, and it was literally the beginning of your consciousness. The first thing you were aware of was the rhythm of your mother's heartbeat. That heartbeat accompanied you, supported you, and comforted you for months, right up to the moment of your birth. It is no wonder that hearing remained your dominant sense for the first years of your life.

Although it may seem hard to believe when you are trying to get a roomful of four-year-olds to listen to you, hearing is a young child's dominant sense. Sound is the straightest path to a young child's attention, and the most powerful sound is rhythmic sound. Rhythm instruments provide a physical connection to music. We can listen to music, and we can sing music. But when we play instruments, we are connected to music in a deep physical sense. Young children often find singing problematic. The song may be at a difficult pitch for them to sing along with comfortably. They may be shy or embarrassed about singing in public. The song may be too fast for them to understand all the words. But the nonverbal quality of rhythm instruments frees children to explore music more easily and naturally, using their hands and other parts of their bodies to create different sounds.



Rhythm instruments allow a wide range of expression. Young children have much richer emotional lives than they can express in words. Playing music gives them opportunities to express themselves fully and freely. Rhythm instruments encourage creative thinking. I am constantly amazed and delighted by the imaginative ways children make music with rhythm instruments. Sometimes I can almost hear them thinking, "At last! Something where I can't make a mistake, where I'm not going to be corrected or evaluated." Rhythm instruments can be played any way children want to play them. With these activities, children are truly creators of their own learning.

We know that young children love to play rhythm instruments. But are there any real educational and developmental benefits? Let me count the ways.

- **Math:** Yes, math! Playing rhythm instruments involves keeping a beat, and the beat in music is math made audible. It is a pattern that repeats over and over. It is time divided into equal parts—ratios and proportions. Four-year-olds may not understand the vocabulary of math, but they internalize math concepts when they play instruments. Research supports this, indicating that early music training leads to better understanding of mathematical concepts. When we are actively involved in making music, we energize neuronal patterns in a way similar to what occurs when we play chess or work on complex math problems. Rhythmic music activities may be our best tools for building early math skills.
- **Language and emergent literacy:** Because rhythm and music support the brain's ability to process sights and sounds, they may help develop literacy skills. Rhythm activities often involve listening for patterns and sequences; beginnings, middles, and endings; and changes in dynamics (loud and soft sounds), all skills needed for language learning. Children who engage in active music making show stronger neural activation to pitch changes in speech and have a better vocabulary and reading ability than children who do not engage in active music making. Because young children are so engaged and focused when playing rhythm instruments, this is a tremendously effective and age-appropriate way to encourage early literacy skills.

- **Social and emotional development:** Joining in rhythmic activities with a group helps young children bond with others and builds group cohesion. Music activities are so much fun that children are motivated to behave appropriately and join in. As children sing, move, and play instruments together, they practice social skills such as taking turns, respecting others' boundaries, and listening to others' ideas in a relaxed, playful setting. These skills are vital for successful socialization and academic success. Rhythmic activities also support emotional health and happiness. Some studies indicate that oxytocin (a hormone that produces a positive feeling of social bonding) is released when people sing and make rhythmic music together. The joy of expressing oneself in music supports every aspect of learning and makes every day more meaningful and fun.
- **Science:** Young children do not want to just listen to music. They want to know how music is made, where it comes from, and why things sound the way they do. Children are so relentlessly curious. I sometimes think if adults still had that kind of curiosity, we would all be geniuses! Through rhythm instrument activities, children learn many science concepts:
 - Sounds can be loud or soft.
 - Different instruments and materials make different sounds.
 - The force with which we touch an instrument affects its sound.
 - Small instruments make higher-pitched sounds than larger instruments.
 - Sound travels through air and objects.
 - Different performance techniques, such as tapping, shaking, plucking, strumming, and scraping, create different sounds.
 - Exploring music is actually exploring and experimenting with sound, and young children are fascinated by the variety of sounds they can create.
- **Listening skills:** Rhythmic sound is a powerful tool for focusing children's attention and engaging them in an activity. It gets the whole class engaged as a group in hearing and participating in a music activity together. Rhythm instrument activities encourage active listening in which children are challenged to concentrate and focus. The skill of active listening helps children to be successful in every area of learning.

- **Physical development:** Playing rhythm instruments involves a set of physical abilities and skills. Young children's fine-motor skills are reinforced as they tap rhythm sticks together, hold sand blocks by the small knobs and scrape them, and perform other basic techniques. Abilities such as balancing bell bracelets on your head or holding a drum tucked in your elbow while tapping it with the other hand are more challenging and stretch children's skills.
- **Musical concepts:** I believe in teaching young children musical concepts in a developmentally appropriate way. They do not need to know about intervals and scales, for instance, but it is appropriate to help them learn the concepts of high sounds and low sounds. They do not need to know musical terminology to understand fast and slow. I do not talk about timbre (sound quality), but we explore the difference in the sounds made by metal instruments and wooden instruments. These kinds of explorations are more meaningful and engaging for young children than formal instruction.

Rhythm instrument activities not only inspire children's curiosity and creativity, but they also help them learn everything from math and science to literacy and social skills. Every child deserves the joy of creating music—and the educational benefits that go with it.

Activities Using Rhythm Sticks

There are many advantages to introducing rhythm sticks as the first rhythm instrument at the beginning of the school year, at least for children between ages three and five. Playing rhythm sticks produces a sharp, clear sound, which helps children to follow your rhythm or that of the recording they are playing along with. The sound helps them to keep a steady beat. Playing rhythm sticks is a natural extension of the motions involved in clapping and in patting thighs, both of which are instinctive ways young children respond to music.

Note: Unless specified, all rhythm-instrument activities are to be performed with the group sitting in a circle, with each child sitting with legs crossed.

Rhythm sticks need to be introduced carefully, however. As with all instruments, bring out one first, and demonstrate how to play safely. Hold rhythm sticks so that they are leaning on the floor. Emphasize that this is where the sticks always belong: on the floor. One teacher I know suggests resting your forearms on your thighs when sitting cross-legged; this will almost automatically put your arms in a good position to lean the sticks on the floor.

Demonstrate tapping one stick against the other gently, while holding the lower one leaning on the floor. Then, show children the scraping motion—scraping the smooth stick against the ridged one, which is leaning on the floor. Pass the pair of sticks around the circle and let each child try them out to show you they know the safe way to hold the rhythm sticks. Then you can bring out pairs of sticks for each child to use with an activity.



If, after one or two activities, you see that several children persist in playing sticks up near their heads or too near other children, they are clearly not developmentally ready to play rhythm sticks safely. Take a break for a month or two before you try the rhythm sticks again.

Toddlers and two-year-olds can play musical activities using one stick per child (they are not yet coordinated enough to use two sticks). They can gently tap the sticks on the floor, roll them on the floor with two hands, slide the sticks forward and back, and use a stirring motion close to the floor. Also, I recommend shorter sticks (8 inches) for very young children.

I do not mean for these suggestions to scare you away from using rhythm sticks—just the opposite! Rhythm sticks are a valuable learning tool and lots of fun. Young children, however, need safety rules and supervision to play them, just as they need rules to cut with scissors or play on playground equipment. When used safely, rhythm sticks are a wonderful way for young children to become engaged in creating music.

When I Wake Up

This activity is fairly easy, with one movement per verse. This makes it ideal for students at the beginning of the school year or whenever they are beginning to use the rhythm sticks. Emphasize the three-beat pattern at the end of each line.

1. Tap the sticks together to the beat as you sing to the tune of "A Sailor Went to Sea, Sea, Sea":
When I wake up I tap, tap, tap.
And all day long I tap, tap, tap.
I go to sleep and tap, tap, tap.
'Til I wake up and tap, tap, tap!
2. Additional verses:
When I wake up I tap the floor...
When I wake up I scrape, scrape, scrape...
(scrape the sticks together)
When I wake up I hammer, hammer, hammer...
(hold one stick upright and "hammer" it with the other stick)
3. Ask the children to contribute their own ideas for stick motions. Tip: Ask the children to raise their hands if they have an idea so you may call on them. Otherwise you may have many voices piping up at once!
4. If you have a small group, you may want to go around the circle and have each child contribute an idea for a motion. Then, insert that child's name in the verse with that motion, for instance, "When Shawn wakes up he scrapes, scrapes, scrapes."

LEARNING BENEFITS

- Curiosity (exploring music and instruments)
- Fine-motor skills
- Improvisation and creative thinking
- Keeping a steady beat
- Kinesthetic awareness
- Patterns
- Rhythmic awareness
- Social skills (sharing ideas and respecting those of others)



And Then They Go to Sleep

This activity uses different stick movements and ends each verse with a quiet “bedtime.”



LEARNING BENEFITS

- Curiosity
- Fine-motor skills
- Improvisation and creative thinking
- Listening skills
- Rhythmic awareness
- Science (use light force to lay the sticks on floor to “sleep”)
- Social skills

1. Tap the sticks and sing to the tune of “Buffalo Gals,” emphasizing taps on the last three beats of each of the first three lines:
Two little sticks go tap, tap, tap,
Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.
Two little sticks go tap, tap, tap,
And then they go to sleep. Sshh!
(gently lay the sticks down)
2. Additional verses:
Two little sticks go scrape, scrape, scrape . . .
Two little sticks go swish, swish, swish . . . (hold the sticks on the floor and swish like windshield wipers)
Two little sticks go drum, drum, drum . . . (tap floor)
3. Ask the children for more ideas for playing the sticks.
4. To support listening skills, after each verse the children can leave their sticks flat on the floor until you say, “Wake up!” Then, they can hold the rhythm sticks in the ready-to-play position, with the sticks leaning against the floor, until you begin the next verse.

Music and movement go together like books and reading—they spread joy! It's no secret that quiet doesn't always equal quality learning. At times, we struggle to help children settle down so they can listen and learn. However, we can also encourage them to move to the beat so they can listen and learn in more active ways.

Shake, Rattle, and Roll

In **SHAKE, RATTLE, AND ROLL: Rhythm Instruments and More for Active Learning**, you will find activities that inspire curiosity, exploration, and creativity. When children are singing, moving, listening, and playing music, their creative energy enhances their learning in many areas:

- **Language**—Repetitive songs help develop oral language and early literacy.
- **Math**—Music involves fractions, ratios, patterns, and proportions.
- **Science**—Activities involve acoustics, volume, velocity, mass, and force.
- **Music**—Children explore culture, imagine different environments, and express themselves while playing songs and singing along.

Because there is not just one right way to play rhythm instruments or move to the beat, children can explore their own capabilities while they dance, sing, and play.



Abigail Flesch Connors, an early childhood music teacher and author of *101 Rhythm Instrument Activities for Young Children*, has been teaching for more than twenty years. She has presented workshops for the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the New Jersey Association for Music Education, the Coalition of Infant/Toddler Educators, and many other groups. She received a bachelor of music degree from Manhattanville College and a master of education degree from the University of Connecticut. Her website is musicforyoungchildren.wordpress.com.



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