

Early Childhood Music

Community Music School (CMS) – Michigan State University

At CMS we believe

...every child is musical.
...every person benefits from music interaction, music play, and music learning.
...children are master learners, and teachers should follow their lead.
...making music is an important life skill because it fosters engagement, personal growth, and enjoyment throughout the lifespan.

Pedagogy: Young children learn music much like they learn language. Before they can speak, read, or write, they need to hear lots of language and have opportunities to play with sounds. Music learning works the same way: children need to hear and explore a wide variety of music before they are ready to sing, play, and eventually create music themselves.

Our early childhood classes are designed to immerse children in a rich, playful musical environment. Each child is encouraged to interact in their own way—some will actively participate, while others may prefer to quietly observe. Both are valid and important ways of learning. Ask your teacher for guidance if you aren't sure about your child's engagement.

Classes vary based on age and readiness, but all include:

- **Singing and chanting** in many tonalities and meters
- **Songs without words** to help children focus on musical sounds rather than lyrics
- **Age-appropriate movement**, including flowing as well as beat and gross motor skills
- **Exposure to tonal and rhythmic patterns** that children may echo and create with time
- **Use of props and a few instruments**, to allow exploration and encourage responses

We never expect “correct” responses from children. Instead, we provide opportunities for joyful, meaningful exploration and interaction—just as we do when children are learning to speak.

Your Role as a Parent or Caregiver

Your participation in class is important. Please:

- Sit with your child and model participation—sing, move, and respond to the teacher's actions.
- Remember, you do not need to have any particular abilities—only a willingness to learn and try.
- Don't worry if your child chooses not to participate right away. Some children learn best by watching, wandering, or taking it all in quietly.
- Gently encourage your child to stay near the group, but avoid forcing participation. Our goal is to build a positive, pressure-free musical experience.

Help us maintain a focused environment:

- **Please do not bring food, drink, toys, or electronic devices including phones into the classroom.** They are distracting to the children. You can leave bags with these items in the hall with your shoes.
- The teacher will provide links to recordings of class music so you can enjoy it together during the week. Sing, chant, or move to the music at home to enrich your child's experience.

Frequently Asked Questions

Why do you sing so many songs without words?

Words are powerful and essential for communication—but they can distract from musical learning. Children in the midst of language development often focus on lyrics instead of melody, rhythm, or pitch. By removing words, we help them attend to the music itself.

The songs and chants sound hard—even I struggle with them. Are they too difficult for kids?

Not at all! Adults often find these songs challenging because we're used to major tonality and duple rhythms. Children haven't yet developed those preferences, so they're more open to unusual tonalities and meters. These experiences build a rich musical foundation that supports future learning.

Why don't you use more instruments?

At this stage, the human voice is the most effective tool for music learning. Children respond more naturally and musically to singing. We do include limited percussion play to explore sound (timbre) and for fun, but extensive use of instruments is not developmentally appropriate just yet.

My child isn't participating. Should I be worried?

Not at all—really! Some children learn best by watching. Even if they seem distracted or uninterested, they're still processing what they hear and see. Participation will come in their own time. Forcing participation can actually create resistance. Trust the process and keep modeling joyful music-making in class and at home.

I think my child might be TOO active. Should I be worried?

No! If your child is very active or vocal, this is also an important and valid way to learn music. Your teacher will use engaging music interactions, offer choices, and ask for your assistance in specific ways that will help focus your child's attention and keep other children safe.

Why don't the children sing with the teacher?

Young children often aren't ready to match pitch or sing in time with adults. Instead, we sing *for* them, trusting that they'll experiment on their own. With time and maturity—often around age five—they begin to sing with us. Until then, they're learning through listening and exploration—and we will engage with the sounds they are making *between* songs to guide their learning.

Please don't hesitate to ask if you have further questions. You can talk to your child's teacher or contact the program's director, Karen Salvador, at ksal@msu.edu.

We are thrilled to be part of your child's musical journey!

— *Community Music School Faculty*