

Listen, Sing, Play

Nature-Related, Low-Cost Music Activities

Music is a unique tool for helping children develop skills in all developmental domains. Rethinking the way we use music in early childhood education settings and being creative in using available resources can support children's learning.

Music activities are motivating, engaging children with various ability levels equally, and can be easily embedded in daily routines or adapted to individual needs. Today many early childhood programs face financial strains and must accomplish more with limited resources. In this article, we provide examples of music activities that use natural and low-cost materials and are ideal for preschool settings.

We hope you will be inspired to use these activities with preschoolers. When thinking creatively and following children's curiosity and imagination, you may discover many ways to help children appreciate nature and foster their learning while enjoying music.

Take a Soundwalk

What?

A soundwalk is a method proposed by Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer for identifying a soundscape—the sounds typically heard—for a specific location (see Schafer 1993). Children and teachers walk through a natural area with their ears as open as possible.

Why?

Children learn through listening, imitation, and repetition. A soundwalk will teach children *focused listening*, which is attentive and purposeful listening to the specific sounds in a chosen environment. Children also have the opportunity to learn about the natural environment and discuss how to preserve it.

How?

1. Choose a nearby environment (ideally a natural environment like a park, but if this is not possible, just go outdoors and find the sounds of nature around you).
2. Walk or take children on a field trip to the chosen location.
3. Ask children to put on their listening ears and pay attention to all of the sounds they can hear around them.
4. Invite children to share what they have heard and help them label the sounds correctly. If possible, let children touch, smell, and/or see

the sound sources. For example, if children hear a bird cooing, suggest looking up in a tree or on a rooftop to find the bird.

5. Use the moment and teach children something about what they have heard (the name of the bird; where it makes its nest) and how to take care of the environment.
6. Ask children to use their voices to imitate the sounds. Lead a vocal improvisation by using keynote sounds, figure sound, and soundmarks.
Keynote sounds are the basic environmental sounds that are steady, predictable, and always there (for example, the chirping of birds or crickets). Figure sounds are in the front of the perceptive focus. They are surprising, sudden, or annoying (for example, a crow's cry, phone ring, or camera click). Soundmarks are the sounds that you think of in reference to a specific place (for example, sirens in a city or a buoy clanking in a harbor).

Extension

- Record a soundwalk and bring it to the classroom. Let children guess where you recorded the sounds. Bring props, if applicable, to illustrate the sound sources.
- Read and discuss books about how to care for the natural environment where the soundwalk took place.

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“It Looks Like Rain” Paddle Drum Activity

What?

Explore ways to maximize the function of available musical instruments in your classroom for children’s learning and development. Paddle drums have a round, flat head attached to a handle. The head is pretuned. They come in different sizes. The larger the head, the deeper the sound.

In this activity, children can

- hold and play the drum with a hand, a mallet, or other item.
- tickle, rub, tap, or hit the drum for different sound effects.
- play the paddle drum against different body parts.
- tie scarves to the handle and use the drum as a movement prop.



Why?

Playing the game “It Looks Like Rain” encourages children to explore sounds and move their bodies to music. Such games also help build children’s language comprehension, improve fine motor skills, and increase spatial awareness. While playing the paddle drum, children can go from quiet to loud and slow to fast at specific points in a story; rub, tap, and hit the paddle drum using various hand and finger positions; and follow positional changes (for example, up and down) with the paddle drum.

How?

1. Gather paddle drums, scarves or wrist streamers, and small laminated pictures of the sun.

2. Attach a scarf or wrist streamer to each paddle drum handle. Tape a picture of the sun to each paddle drum.
3. Have children sit in a circle, listen to the story, and follow your directions (shown in brackets above) for what to do with their paddle drums.

Extensions

- Add other sound effects (for example, thunder tube to imitate the thunder, a rain stick to imitate the rain, or a gong to imitate the storm) and have children play them when cued.
- Use any available hand drum or make one from recycled materials, such as coffee cans and lids, oatmeal boxes, and paint stirrers.

It Looks Like Rain, by Beth McLaughlin

Here comes a cloud. It looks like rain. [*Hold the paddle drum above your head*]
Here comes the wind. It looks like rain. [*Rub the drum with the palm of your hand*]
Here comes the thunder. It looks like rain. [*Hit the drum slowly*]
Here comes the lightning. It looks like rain. [*Hit the drum faster*]
Here comes the rain! Here comes the rain!
Get your umbrellas, 'cause here comes the rain. [*Hold the drum above your head and tap it with your fingers*]
Here comes the rainbow. Now we can have some fun. [*Hold the drum above your head with the sun toward you and move it from side to side*]
The rain has stopped. Here comes the sun. [*Hold the drum still and turn it so everyone else can see the sun*]
Here comes the sun! [*Keep holding the drum above your head and move it from side to side with the sun facing your friends*]

“Five Little Apples” Finger Play

What?

Use simple, accessible, and inexpensive materials to make finger puppets to use when singing songs and doing finger plays like “Five Little Apples.”

Why?

Puppets are an effective way to help children pay attention and get involved while singing a song or doing a finger play. The puppets stimulate the visual and kinesthetic senses that support listening. Children can participate in finger plays by imitating simple movements and the rhythm and rhyme of a repeated vocal refrain.

How?

1. Purchase a package of inexpensive cotton work gloves at a hardware store or online. They are sold by the dozen.
2. Wash and dry the gloves so the fabric shrinks (this makes them thicker so they last longer).
3. Choose decorative items included in a song or finger game (for example, small wooden fruits, rubber animals, or flowers).
4. Glue or Velcro one item on each finger.
5. Use the glove puppet when singing a song or doing a finger play. To introduce this finger play, wear a cotton glove with a wooden apple on each finger. Make a glove for each child.

Extensions

- Play a slide whistle to give auditory cues while pretending to climb up and down the tree.
- After repeating the song and finger-play a few times, invite children to take turns wearing the gloves and playing the slide whistle.

REFERENCE

Schafer, R.M. 1993. *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books.



Music activities adapted from P. Kern, “Sound Walk,” *Early Childhood Newsletter* 15 (Fall 2009): 37; B. McLaughlin, “It Looks Like Rain,” *Early Childhood Newsletter* 15 (Fall 2009): 34; B. McLaughlin, “Five Little Apples,” *Early Childhood Newsletter* 13 (Summer 2007): 19.

Five Little Apples, by Beth McLaughlin

Five little apples hanging on a tree. [*Hold up 5 fingers.*]

One fell down and hit my knee. [*Show 1 apple, then tap your knees.*]

It rolled to you. It rolled to me. [*Roll your arms and point to children, then to yourself.*]

How many apples are now in the tree? [*Gesture a question with a shrug and upturned hands.*]

Four little apples . . . [*Repeat the steps above until there are no little apples.*]

No little apples hanging on a tree. [*Make a fist with glove hand to show no apples.*]

None for you and none for me. [*Point to children, then to yourself*]
They're all on the ground as you can see. [*Take off the glove and drop it to the floor.*]

Now it's safe to climb the apple tree! [*Make a climbing motion with one hand stretched overhead at a time.*]