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Home Listening Practices of Parents, Infants, and Toddlers: A Survey of Parents Enrolled in Early Childhood Music Education Classes

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Musical interactions between parents and their very young children are common both in and outside the home (Custodero, 2006; Custodero & Johnson-Green, 2003; Fox, 2000; Howe, Davidson, Moore, & Sloboda, 1995). The scope and frequency of these experiences can vary (Custodero & Johnson-Green, 2003), and their nature and characteristics are often shaped by each parent's unique musical background and attitude toward music (Custodero & Johnson-Green, 2003; Duke, Flowers, & Wolfe, 1997). Many parents structure impromptu musical experiences with their children throughout the day that include listening to recorded music or singing, whereas others arrange formal experiences in an early childhood music classroom.

A national survey by Custodero & Johnson-Green (2003) examined how parents experienced music with their infants and found that many reported playing and singing music frequently. More than half of the parents described playing recorded music for their children daily, and parents who had played an instrument and taken music lessons themselves as children were more likely to report playing recorded music to their infants than parents who had not had the same childhood experience. Particularly relevant to the present study is the finding that parents who were given a classical music CD at the time of their child's birth were not more likely to provide listening opportunities for their children than they would have if not given such a recording. Parents enrolled in early music classes are often provided with recordings of class material, though little is known about how parents utilize these recordings.

In addition to playing music for their children, most surveyed parents also reported singing to their children daily (Custodero & Johnson-Green, 2003). Parents who were sung to when they were children were more likely to report singing to their own children. Many described doing so while engaging their infants and toddlers in everyday routines, such as bathing, feeding, or diaper changing, during playtime, and while upholding traditions and experiences from their own childhood. Some parents reported singing spontaneous or made-up songs with their infants as needed (Custodero, 2006; Custodero & Johnson-Green, 2003). This suggests singing music may be an improvisatory decision for many parents, which illuminates the responsiveness and flexibility they often exhibit with their infant children.

Interactions between parents and their young children are present in early childhood music classrooms, where the parent-child dyad actively works together toward a common musical goal

(Fox, 2000). During class, singing and listening provide the opportunity for parents to engage with their child and interact with the music, however, little is known about whether parents structure similar musical interactions with their children at home. Such interactions can encourage the building and maintaining of strong emotional ties (de l'Etoile, 2006; Trehub et al., 1997), and educators working with this population often strive to increase the frequency and quality of such interactions.

The present study investigated how families enrolled in an early childhood music education class used a recording intended for home practice with their young children. Research questions were designed to identify how often, how long, and when parents listened to class material with their children, and to identify what parents and their children did while listening to the recordings. The survey also asked parents why they chose to enroll their children in the class.

Method

A survey was completed by 17 families participating in a university-sponsored music education program for children who ranged in age from 10 months to 4 years. Each family had been given a CD containing audio recordings of action songs and rhymes used during class. The survey asked parents to provide information about their family's musical background, listening habits outside of class, and interactions with their child while listening to music at home.

Background information: how long the student has participated in this music class, participation in other early childhood music classes, parent's musical background, and reasons why they chose to enroll their child in an early music class.

Home listening habits: how often, how long, and when parents listened, process of selecting songs for listening, presence of a parent during home listening, and parent and child activities while listening.

Transfer of materials: use of songs and rhymes outside of class in situations other than home listening, and familiarity with the songs and rhymes from class by other adults and siblings living in the child's home.

Results and Discussion

Ten parents (59%) reported listening to the recording of class material on a weekly basis, two (12%) reported daily listening, two (12%) reported listening on a monthly basis, and two (12%) reported never listening to the class recording at all. The results are in agreement with those from a national survey showing that most parents listen to recorded music with their infant at least once per week (Custodero & Johnson-Green, 2003). Although early music classes often prompt parents to listen to specific recordings daily, it seems that this expectation may be difficult to attain.

Four parents (24%) noted on the survey that their listening had decreased since they first acquired the recording. One parent wrote, "We played it a lot, multiple times per week, for a

couple of months and then got tired of it.” Another parent reported, “We listened to it frequently the first year, but not as much this year.” Parents who are encouraged through class and home activities to systematically rotate through different parts of the recording may be less likely to experience a sharp decline in listening over the year.

When parents were asked at what time of day they listened to the recording with their child, three parents (18%) indicated morning, one parent (6%) indicated afternoon, three parents (18%) indicated evening, four parents (24%) indicated they listened at inconsistent times, and five parents (30%) indicated that they played the recording while driving. Past studies have found that many parents reported singing music spontaneously and improvisatorially with their infant children throughout daily routines (Custodero, 2006; Custodero & Johnson-Green, 2003). Singing gives parents more flexibility to stop and start and requires less set-up and equipment than playing recorded music, which may make it easier for parents to incorporate singing intermittently throughout their daily routine. Conversely, findings from the present study suggest that parents listen to music during pockets of time they have structured into their day, and no parents indicated listening throughout the day.

Listening duration times varied greatly between families. Six parents (36%) reported listening to the recording between 1-15 minutes, while six (36%) reported listening for 16-30 minutes, and four (24%) listened with their child for 31-60 minutes. Parents also indicated a variety of listening practices. Some reported listening to the recording from beginning to end before restarting the recording again, while others described playing their child’s favorite songs or those songs that elicited the most response from their child. Some parents indicated they selected the songs most often sung in class to provide a sense of familiarity for their children, yet others indicated they selected those that were not being used in class to provide variety throughout the week.

When asked to report on their own behaviors and their child’s behaviors while listening at home, some parents described music-centered activities, such as singing, clapping, tapping, and dancing. Thirteen parents (77%) reported they engaged in these activities themselves, and ten parents (59%) reported that their children engaged in such activities. Some parents may not have felt comfortable participating in these activities or may have had their attention directed towards other activities. Of particular note is that parents who reported listening in the car were less likely to describe their children as engaged in music-centered activities. It is unclear if these children did not engage in overt musical behaviors or if parents were less likely to notice their children’s behaviors. Listening may be a readily available activity in the car, but it seems that the nature of parent-child interactions could be different in this situation than in others. It is important to note that differences in teaching styles may affect how parents utilize a recording intended for home practice. Teachers who suggest engaging in musical play during home listening may be able to influence the parent-student dyad and alter the expectations and attitudes of the parent (Creech & Hallam, 2009; Creech & Hallam, 2010). Future research could explore how teachers can best help parents and their children engage in stimulating musical play in the home environment.

Parents indicated many different reasons for enrolling their child in an early childhood music class. Nine parents (53%) identified musical goals such as growing up with music. One parent stated, “I want them to grow up with music in their lives,” and another parent expressed the desire, “To plant a musical seed within the child.” Six parents (35%) identified developmental goals for enrolling their child, such as improving brain development, increasing IQ or academic achievement, or providing opportunities for their child to work with peers in a structured environment. Four parents (24%) cited enjoyment of music as a reason for enrolling, and two

parents (12%) listed other objectives, such as enrolling their child to be with friends or to gain admittance into a program of study.

Musical interactions between parents and their children can be enjoyable experiences for everyone involved. Music teachers working with this special population are often seeking ways to enhance the quantity and quality of these experiences both inside the classroom and within children's home environment. Exploring how parents use music class material outside of the classroom provides valuable insight on how to best help these parent-child dyads.

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