

101 Rhythm Instrument Activities for Young Children

Dedication

To the memory of my mother, Elizabeth Terpenning Flesch, who always encouraged and supported my creativity.

101 Rhythm Instrument Activities for Young Children

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Introduction

As soon as babies are able to hold objects, they start to bang them, shake them, and throw them on the floor. They do this to learn about their bodies' capabilities, to explore their environment, and to test the properties of physical objects, but most of all, they do this to experience the joy of creating sounds. What a wonderful feeling it is when they discover that they can make noise in so many ways! It's a feeling of wonder, delight, and power. To paraphrase seventeenth century philosopher René Descartes, the baby's philosophy is: "I'm LOUD, therefore I am!"

As early childhood teachers, our goal must be to respect and satisfy children's need to make noise, while gently guiding them toward expressing themselves musically.

Rhythm instruments provide a uniquely effective medium to bridge this gap. Children respond to rhythm sticks, shakers, and other instruments with instinctive enthusiasm. They literally celebrate life with a bang (and a shake, rattle, and roll)! And when you use rhythm instruments in the context of songs, stories, and musical games, children develop an awareness of rhythm, phrasing, tempo, and other elements of musicality. It's an incredible joy to see children discover the music within themselves!

You know how important music is for young children. I'm not just referring to its role in the development of many kinds of intelligence—which has been well documented—but the sheer joy of experiencing music. For socialization and a feeling of belonging, nothing compares with the bond that is formed when a group makes music together. Shy children will start to come out of their shells a bit to join in, and aggressive children will cooperate so they can take part in the fun. Music, a natural outlet for creativity and self-expression, is a basic human need. Yet some children don't even realize that music is something they can create. Once I was singing a song with a group of children and a little girl asked, "But where's the *music*, Miss Abby? Where's the *music*?" She was looking around me and behind me. It took me a moment to realize that she meant, "Where's the CD?" She was bewildered by the idea of people making their own music!

For many of you, the most basic, natural way to express musical ideas is through singing, and I encourage a lot of singing. The problem is that not all children will participate in singing activities. Some children live in homes where there isn't a lot of singing, and some are just naturally shy or self-conscious. There are many reasons why a child may not feel comfortable singing in a group.

Another problem in preschool is that singing often occurs in the context of learning a new song, which is a hard thing for many young children. Learning a new song involves listening, remembering words, understanding words, pronouncing words, remembering and singing a tune—quite a lot of skills.

In contrast, rhythm instrument activities are so easy! Most of them involve simply copying one motion at a time. There's nothing to remember. Also, there's no right or wrong way to do it, which leaves plenty of room for individuality.

Another wonderful thing about rhythm instruments is that they involve the *body* in keeping a beat and feeling rhythm. The children are fully participating musically. They're really creating music, without even trying!

Rhythm instrument activities both reinforce and build *body awareness*, as you use different parts of the body ("Let's shake it on our arms; let's shake it behind our backs"). They build *spatial awareness* as you move the instruments through space in various directions and with big and small ranges of motion. It encourages *movement exploration* and expands your *movement repertoire and vocabulary*. For instance, a child may not have performed a certain movement before, such as turning a shaker around or shaking it upside down. As the children experience the new movement, I verbalize it ("Now you're turning your shaker around") so that the vocabulary stays with them—because they're *doing* it while they're hearing the words.

These activities also promote *understanding of concepts* such as up and down, over and under, high and low, soft and loud, short and long, in and out, and stop and go.

With all of these possibilities, rhythm instruments are truly an extraordinary learning tool, and they're so much fun!

During more than 12 years as an early childhood music specialist, I've taught rhythm instrument activities to toddlers, preschoolers, and kindergarteners; in small groups and large groups; in all kinds of settings. One thing is true everywhere I go—kids love playing rhythm instruments!

I've found rhythm instrument games and activities to be so enjoyable—for the children I teach and for myself—that I've often wondered: Why don't more teachers of young children use rhythm instruments on a regular basis? I believe that the only reason is that there is simply a lack of resources for teaching rhythm instrument activities.

I'm constantly scouring libraries, bookstores, and catalogs for any and all teaching materials relating to music and young children. Although many excellent books, recordings, and videos are out there, I have never found a single book devoted to the use of rhythm instruments with groups of young children.

I noticed that preschool children in my class were very curious and excited about rhythm instruments and wanted to play them more than just once in a while. They taught me, with their inspiring inventiveness and imagination, that there was a lot more to experience and explore with rhythm instruments!

That's when I began to develop my own rhythm instruments curriculum—to help children explore the sound and movement possibilities of playing rhythm instruments. I created this book to share these activities with preschool teachers and others who are looking for meaningful musical experiences for their classes. It's a selection of activities for many kinds of rhythm instruments. Some activities are my original creations; some are adapted from traditional songs and stories. You'll find activities for rhythm sticks, shakers (maracas), jingle bells, sand blocks, and many other instruments.

Quality rhythm instruments are readily available and (with some exceptions) usually quite inexpensive. Many rhythm instruments are easy to make as a class project, costing little or nothing! (See *Rubber-Band Banjos and a Java Jive Bass: Projects and Activities on the Science of Music and Sound* by Alex Sabbeth, published by John Wiley, 1997.) Recordings and instruments can be found in school supply stores and catalogs, in bookstores, and on websites.

This isn't the kind of book where you need to start at the beginning and go through to the end. For instance, you may decide one day that you haven't used rhythm sticks in a while, so you could just turn to that section and choose an activity. Or you may be teaching a unit on weather, shapes, trains, or whatever, and you could turn to the **Seasons Index** or **Subject Index** for an appropriate activity. (Hopefully, you will enjoy looking through the whole book at some point, too!)

These activities are so easy to do! You don't need a lot of space or a lot of time. You don't need to read music or prepare materials or even practice—you can just open this book and start using it.

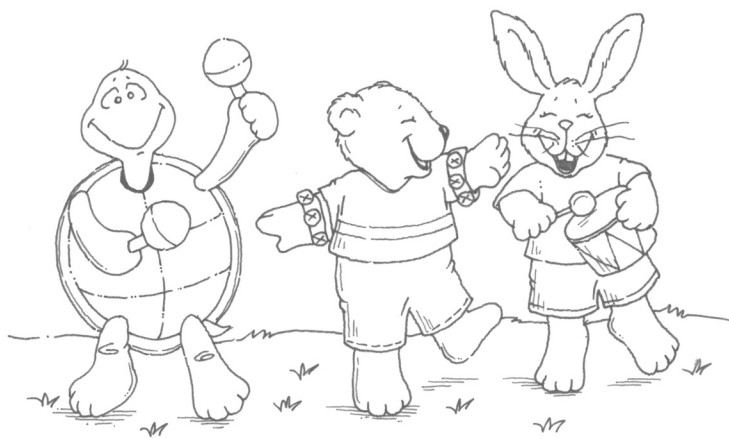
Most of the activities here are suitable for children ages 3-6, but many are also appropriate for children as young as 18 months (see the section **Good Activities for Toddlers**).

Music is a vital part of children's lives, and when they can make music themselves it is immensely satisfying for them. I know you'll have a great time sharing their joy and excitement! Have fun!



10 Classroom Management Tips for Using Rhythm Instruments

- 1** Tell children to keep their hands in their laps when you are passing out instruments. If you have a very rambunctious group, try playing “Simon Says” while you pass out instruments. While the children sit in the circle, say, “Simon says touch your ears...” “Simon says touch your nose...” “Simon says clap your hands...” and so on. This will keep their attention focused (and their hands busy!) for a minute.
- 2** Another good distraction while you’re passing out instruments is to ask, “What if?” questions. For example, “What if the instruments were made of glass? What would happen?” “What if they were made of paper?” “What if the instruments were teeny-tiny? Who could play them?”
- 3** Using child “helpers” to pass out instruments actually can be very helpful! The first few times, select children who are fairly responsible and good at following directions. Explain that they should pass out the instruments in order, not to their best friends first. Keep a chart or list of helpers so that everyone gets a turn.
- 4** Make it a rule that children do not pick up instruments until you tell them that they may. It is a good idea to take an instrument away from a child who is not listening, but return it as soon as possible to give him or her another opportunity to listen (and have fun!).
- 5** Make sure the children have enough space to play their instruments freely. Try to have “breathing room” between children. Also, if possible, position the group so that no one is backed up against a wall or toy shelf.



6

Make sure everyone in the group can see your face and hear what you're saying.

7

Emphasize the correct position for playing instruments. I used to do too much "don't"-ing: "Don't bang it too hard," "Don't play it near your face," and so on, until all the children would chime in with their suggestions for more rules. One little girl said, "And you should never put it inside your nose!" (I hadn't thought of that one!)

8

As further incentive to handle instruments carefully, talk about what the instruments are made of—usually wood, metal, or hard plastic. Pointing this out makes children less likely to be careless.

9

If your group doesn't respond well to word signals, try sound signals such as a whistle, kazoo, or bell to signal it's time to stop playing. You can make a game out of practicing this for a while. Ask the children to play their instruments, and see who can respond the fastest to the sound signal to stop. This is one of those "tricks" that can really work wonders.

10

The best management technique of all is to be totally focused on the activity. Show enthusiasm and build anticipation. If YOU are involved, the children will be involved too!



Activities Using Rhythm Sticks

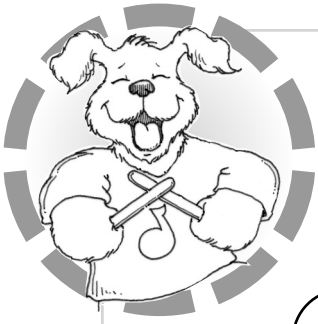
I always introduce rhythm sticks before the other instruments. It seems like the natural thing to do because their sound, unlike the other instruments, makes a very clear, sharp beat. In the developmental journey from noise to music, the beat is like a road, or a track, that keeps you together, headed in the right direction. The hard tap of wood on wood offers an easy-to-hear beat.

The sticks I use with my classes are the wooden kind, which are generally sold in pairs of one smooth and one fluted (with ridges). With this combination, you can scrape the fluted stick with the smooth stick to make an interesting sound, which is featured in many of the following activities.

A word of advice: If you're purchasing rhythm sticks for the first time, try to specify that they are all the same color. If the sticks are different colors, some children may get distracted and ask for particular colors or if they can trade sticks with a friend. Without the color issue, children are free to focus on the musical activity.

So get ready to tap, scrape, hammer, pound, click, and have a great time exploring the sounds of rhythm sticks!



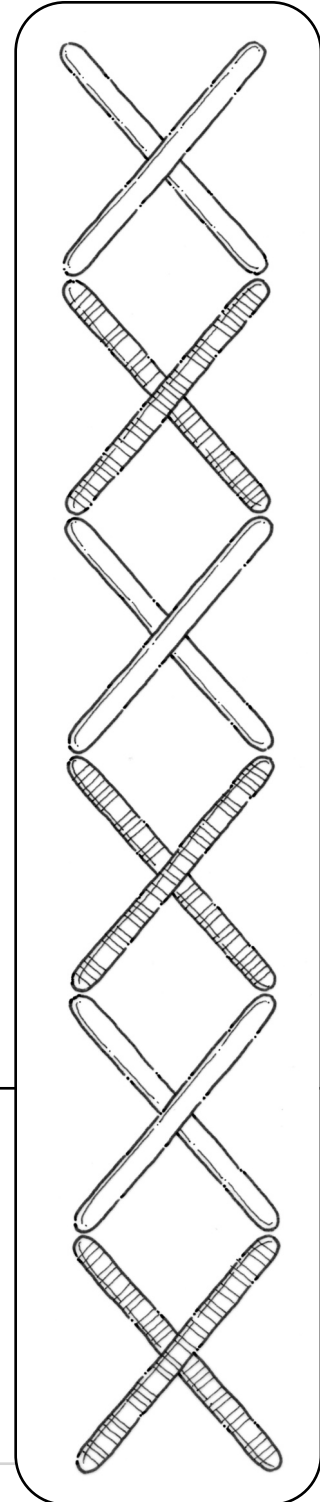


Rhythm Sticks Introduction

If you're hesitant to put large sticks in the hands of preschoolers, you should be! Rhythm sticks are wonderful musical instruments for young children, but they do need to be introduced carefully and thoughtfully.

It can be helpful to teach an introductory lesson using one pair of sticks. Show the children how to hold the sticks, with your forearms resting on your thighs (when sitting cross-legged on the floor, this automatically puts your sticks in a good position) and your hands just a few inches off the floor. Tap the sticks together gently, using only a small wrist motion. You may want to have the children practice this motion a few times without the instruments. Explain that it's not necessary to bang the sticks hard to get a nice loud sound.

Then pass the sticks around the circle and let each child practice proper position and gentle tapping.





Different Ways to Play Sticks

Put on a tape of rhythmic instrumental music, such as a march or anything with a strong, steady beat. Encourage the children to copy you as you play the sticks in different ways. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- tap the sticks together
- tap the floor—sticks together
- tap the floor, alternating right and left sticks
- scrape the sticks together
- “roll” the sticks (hold the sticks waist high, parallel to the ground and pointing towards each other, and roll them around each other with a cranking motion)
- tap your shoes with the sticks
- tap your knees (gently!) with the sticks
- “hammer”—hold one stick vertically on the ground and “hammer” the top with the other stick
- hold the tops of the sticks and pound them vertically on the floor

Variation: Play “Copy the Child.” This game can be played two different ways: you can ask two or three children to have turns of about 30 seconds each to lead the group, or you can go around the circle and let each child do a different motion for the group to copy. (I love this kind of activity because it stimulates the children’s creativity. I’m always amazed at the inventiveness of their ideas!)

This game can also be played with shakers, bells, or other instruments.

This Is the Way We Tap Our Sticks

Sing the following song to the tune of “Here We Go ‘Round the Mulberry Bush”:

*This is the way we tap our sticks,
Tap our sticks, tap our sticks.
This is the way we tap our sticks,
So early in the morning.*

Tap your sticks to the beat while singing the verse.



Then show the children how to rub the smooth stick across the top of the bumpy stick, in an outward motion, to make a scraping sound. Sing:

This is the way we scrape our sticks...

Additional verses:

This is the way we tap them soft...(tap very softly)

This is the way we scrape them soft...(scrape very softly)

This is the way we tap the floor... (tap the floor with both sticks)

This is the way we tap our shoes...(put feet out in front and gently tap shoes with sticks)

Here's a special way to "scrape them loud": Hold the bumpy stick against the floor while scraping it with the smooth stick. Sound travels faster through solids than through the air, and this makes a *huge* sound when a roomful of children do it together. Needless to say, this is a very popular activity!

Sticks Up and Down

This game teaches how to pay careful attention, a skill that the children will need later for more involved activities.

It is actually an introduction to something they'll be doing in almost every rhythm instrument activity: Following your directions for picking up the instruments and for putting them down.

Give each child a pair of rhythm sticks, one plain and one fluted (I call them "smoothies" and "bumpies"). The children should keep their hands in their laps until you ask them to pick up their sticks.

Explain that you will say, "Pick up your sticks" and pick up your own sticks when it is time for them to do so, and that you'll say, "And down," while gently lowering your sticks to the floor, to signal when it's time for them to put their sticks down. This may sound basic, but it's very important for them to know and follow

