

## **Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, What a Musical Child You Are!**

By Mary Ellen Pinzino

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Children are born with innate musical talent. This precious gift has to be nurtured in the earliest years of life, or it will wither rather than bloom. Developmental delays and disabilities do not necessarily affect the young child's potential to learn music. Parents of young children with special needs know the power of music to facilitate growth and development. There is a difference, however, between music for learning and learning music.

Children with special needs benefit in so many ways from music, and they are so attracted to music that it is easy to lose sight of the process of musical growth and development. Greater understanding of the process of music learning can help parents learn to meet their child's musical needs, whatever their own musical background, and whatever the developmental level of their child.

Learning music is much like learning language. The prime difference is in the language itself. The young child's thinking mind processes words. The young child's musical mind processes music. A little child's imagination can be captured by words. The little child's musical imagination—another innate potential that is a powerful force from birth, is not captured by words. Its native language is music.

Our rich heritage of children's songs and nursery rhymes nurtures the very essence of childhood and should always be part of growing with music, but the beloved songs and rhymes stimulate language development more than music development. The focus of the delightful songs and rhymes is the words, which speak to the thinking mind rather than the musical mind. The mother-tongue of the musical mind is rhythm and tonal—without words. Rhythm, alone, is most accessible to the young child and provides the foundation for all music learning.

Nursery rhymes present a layer of words on top of rhythm, making it more difficult for a child to comprehend the rhythm. Traditional songs layer melody on top of rhythm and words, making it even harder for the young child to understand the rhythm. Additional layers of accompaniments and video images make it still more difficult for the young child to access the rhythm. Favorite children's songs and nursery rhymes charm, entertain, capture the imagination, and compel a child learning language, but it is songs and chants without words that capture the musical imagination and engage the young child's musical talent.

It may be easier to learn many things when words are set to music, but it is not easier to learn music. Words to songs limit developing musicianship. Song words suggesting motions can also limit movement, which is essential to music learning. The young child's innate musical talent knows that musical movement is related to rhythm and to tonal rather than to words.

The difficulty of children's songs is generally also a function of the words. The young child is musically ready for far more sophisticated rhythms and melodies than most songs for children

provide. Music learning requires that rhythm and tonal increase in difficulty throughout early childhood and beyond. Once a child has a foundation in rhythm and in tonal, the little musician brings a whole new level of musical understanding to songs with words. Little children devour art songs written for tender ages—songs with words that transport the young child’s musical imagination to new horizons.

Parents of children with special needs may wonder how they could possibly stretch themselves further to do activities for music learning in addition to other developmental activities their child needs. “Parenting Music” offers a whole new arena for parent-child interaction—new ways to relate, new dimensions for play, and new opportunities for a child to succeed. Loving participation in a child’s musical growth can stimulate and sustain developing musical response and prepare a child for a lifetime of music.

Parents can learn to play with rhythm and tonal just as they play with words, so that their child can thrive musically, whatever the parents’ musical background and whatever the child’s developmental level. Parents are always surprised when they witness their infant, baby or toddler’s focused attention to rhythm and to tonal, the intensity of their gaze, and how long they tune in. Parents of children with and without special needs never cease to be amazed at how much their child is attracted to unadorned rhythm and to tonal, and how attentively their little one responds. With a little guidance, parents’ wonderful creativity and intuitive sense of their child can propel music learning.

Rhythm and tonal activities make a delightful addition to day-to-day activities, offering many “aural toys” for a child to explore, to chew on, to dance with, and to grow on. These developmental “toys” speak the native language of the young child’s musical mind and take the child’s musical imagination on one journey after another. Parents can play with their children with these “aural toys” at the changing table, in the rocking chair, inside, outside, and in the car, use them to amuse, settle, entertain, or distract their child, and use them for therapy, all while playfully developing their child’s musical talent. Parents can carry the “aural toys” with them anywhere without having to find room for them in the diaper bag or pick them up off the floor. With a little guidance, parents can inspire their child’s ongoing, developing musicianship as they do language.

The young child’s innate musical talent is ready to absorb, respond, and deliver. Disabilities may inhibit the vocal or physical expression of a child’s musical gifts, but they do not necessarily diminish those gifts. The power of the young child’s natural musical talent often bypasses special needs, allowing a child to develop musically regardless of limitations. Every young child has special musical needs that deserve “early intervention.”

*[Hear sample rhythm and tonal activities and listen to the audio presentation, “Parenting Music,” at [www.comechildrening.com](http://www.comechildrening.com).]*

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