

Music and Movement for the Very Young:

Gari Stein Adds “Baby and You” Class to Her Offerings

By Nieka Apell • Photos by Tobi Hollander



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Many Ann Arborites are familiar with the name Gari Stein and her acclaimed music classes and curricula for children. What families with young children may not be aware of, however, are her group classes for babies as young as three months old with their caregivers. “I just have a passion for working with babies,” said Stein. “I just love it, and I know how beneficial it is to caregivers and to the babies. I want people to know what music and movement can offer, even to the very young.”

Stein has a degree in psychology with a focus on infant mental health, and a dance minor. She moved to Ann Arbor in the early 1990s and started her business Music for Little Folks, a music school for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and the caregivers who love them. The music school began by bringing music and dance into area preschools and daycare centers. “I didn’t really have a specific life plan,” she explained. “It just evolved. I’ve always loved music and sharing music. I don’t necessarily think of myself as a musician, though. I can’t claim to have the best singing voice. But what I have is a love of working with babies and with children, and I love helping families put music into their lives. That is just such a special thing to be able to do for people.”

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Stein authored *The More We Get Together* and developed the “Sing with Me” and the “How to Sing and Dance” series to help families bring music and movement into their homes, and then began offering classes for children at her home studio in Ann Arbor. These popular classes continue, but Stein said that she currently sees a real need for classes geared toward the youngest children, babies three months to pre-walkers. She calls these her “Baby and You” classes, which she will hold either in her studio or remotely in others’ homes for moms’ or caregivers’ groups. Stein explained that many parents of babies feel very isolated. “They can’t often get out of the house to socialize and to just be with other parents. The focus of the class time is music, but it’s not just a time for music. It’s also a time for parenting support. You don’t just come and go; you stay and talk and connect with others at a similar stage in life,” she said, emphasizing that “these classes are not just about the music. It’s about the support and sharing of concerns and resources.”

Stein’s “Baby and You” classes begin with a lullaby to bring the group together, and then include a variety of gentle, slow-paced activities that both stimulate and calm the babies. “It’s about working on the brain-body connection,” explained Stein. “The size of babies’ brains doubles in the first year, so anything we can do to develop those neurological pathways is beneficial.” These classes are based on the



Gari and baby

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Nurturing Pathways program, a research-based curriculum aimed at promoting healthy development of babies' bodies and brains and at strengthening the connection between babies and the people who love them. Babies will bounce on exercise balls, take bedsheets rides, and enjoy folk dances, waltzes, massage, and Mother Goose rhymes with the help of their caregivers. "The goal is to use music, movement, touch, and interpersonal connection to stimulate the babies' brains and to have fun together," explained Stein. For these youngest children, Stein focuses on songs that caregivers can incorporate into daily routines. "We might learn a song that can go along with diapering or dressing," said Stein. "We find opportunities to bring music and body movement into the tasks that happen often and are often a bit mundane. They don't have to be! They can always pick up a baby and dance. A baby — or a parent — can be cranky and then you put on a favorite piece of music and everything feels better." Stein said that one mom recently told her that these classes "remind her that there is still peace and calm in this world." To keep the focus on the babies, older siblings are not invited to the "Baby and You" classes.

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Stein has taught her classes for children of all ages for more than 20 years, and these continue in her home studio in Ann Arbor. These mixed-age classes (for children birth through elementary school) begin with side-to-side rocking and movement to help participants feel centered, and then move to more up-tempo activities including finger plays, chants, folk dances, play with ribbons and scarves, "rock and row" with caregivers and kids holding hands and moving together, and listening to and talking about different types of sound effects. "This is a process-oriented class," explained Stein. "It's not about learning the songs or learning a dance to perform. It's about experiencing music together — together with parents, siblings, friends — and finding joy in that."

Stein emphasized that her classes are different from other programs. "This isn't the kind of class where kids just sit together on a parent's lap or where they are required to do exactly what everyone else is doing all the time," she explained. "It's structured, but also always informal. The kids are always free to move around the room. As long as they are not hurting anyone else or making it hard for someone else to participate, they are free to move, to wander, to explore. I encourage parents to allow that." At the end of each class is what Stein calls the "snack and chat" time. The children eat snacks together and enjoy some free play with different musical instruments, while parents sit together, share articles and resources, and talk about any issues they are facing. Stein said that playgroups are often born from her classes and that participants provide support for one another during times of stress and change, such as illness, new babies, and so on. Stein said that limited scholarships are available for her classes and that she does not turn people away for inability to pay the class fees. "I help find a way to make it work," she said. For both baby and young child classes, families may join a class session at any time.

In addition to class sessions, Stein is one of the leaders of the popular "Dancing Babies" series held at the Ann Arbor District Library. She also holds similar programs for libraries and groups in the area, sharing her message of the benefits of music for young children and their families. "I've always felt that there is more music geared for older children," said Stein. "There are more music programs and opportunities for kids starting in the upper elementary grades." Stein said that she sees a need



for programs for babies through second grade. She said that parents and caregivers often enjoy these programs as much — or more — than the children. She described a recent family dance program where she saw dads initially looking a bit skeptical, as if they weren't sure they wanted to take part. "In the end, it was obvious that the dads had the best time!" said Stein. "A dad came up to me telling me that the workshop was as much fun for him as for the kids. He really enjoyed it!"



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Above all, Stein emphasizes that infusing our lives with music and the joy it brings does not need to be complicated or expensive. Stein recalled that last winter was exceptionally difficult and isolating for many parents in the area. "I really noticed how it affected people," she said. "As we look toward another Midwestern winter, it's important to remember that music is something that can bring joy and that can bring people together. It's positive, and it brings people together. Just getting up, just moving will make you feel better," she said. Stein encourages families to bring out simple things like scarves or maracas or to just put on a favorite piece of music. "It's easy. It doesn't cost anything. So often now, we are competing for each other's attention with our phones, our electronic devices. We think we need these things to be part of the future and to make sure that our kids are a part of it." She cautions, however, that electronic devices can't take the place of real interpersonal connections. "We feel so much pressure to make sure we are helping our children advance, but children and what they really need hasn't changed that much, has it?" she asked. "We need to make time for meaningful connections, for the social piece, for body awareness. Music and dance helps with all of that." Stein said that enhancing personal relationships through music is one of her life's goals. "I'm on a mission," she explained. "I'm not a young person anymore, but as long as I can get up and move and know my name in the morning, then I have a mission to keep bringing music into young people's lives."

Stein encourages parents and caregivers with an interest in her classes to contact her. "I can create a new 'Baby and You' class whenever there is a desire for one," said Stein. Mixed-age classes begin in September, but can be joined at any time.

To find out more about Gari Stein's classes and her workshops at area libraries, visit her website at www.little-folks-music.com/, or call (734) 741-1510, or email garistein@aol.com.