



# Music and Parenting: Somewhat Like A Symphony

*By Gari Stein  
Photos by Susan Ayer*



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Gari Stein of  
Music For Little Folks

**“Music can be your best friend. A simple song can help slow things down, bring everyone together, and give your children a gift of lifelong memories.”**

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Music For Little Folks, founded in 1993, is a community music school, based in traditional music, for children birth through 5 years old and the grown-ups who love them. Working at a local pre-school, I saw the power of music go way beyond the fun factor. With a wish and a prayer, I ventured out on my own to take music into early childhood settings throughout Washtenaw County.

Branching out to provide family classes, I observed much more happening when singing and dancing than the music. Not just with the children, but with the grown-ups, too. Big toes were tapping next to little toes. Folks were smiling and relaxing. Alongside the music making, I found myself conducting a symphony of parenting.



**“With parents being their child’s first and favorite toy, making music together is a time to be fully enjoyed”**

Space is always found for newcomers who are welcomed with open arms. Resources to introduce them to the community are gladly provided. My little music school became a safe, warm environment, inviting friendships and playgroups to form.



Support and networking play a big role in our time together. Folks return with 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and even more siblings. When the time comes to move on, there are tears and heartfelt sadness from the children and the adults. “An important event of community,” “Our time together reminds me that there is still peace and calm in the world” – I love the sound of these comments from two moms.



**“Accepting children where they are developmentally and not comparing them to other children will go a long way.”**



Families from many backgrounds arrive with their own style of parenting. Some folks hover and fret. Introvers are coaxed out, while extroverts are reigned in. Some folks are laid back, giving children space, letting them be. Often adults label their child as shy, while I prefer slow to warm up. Some folks seem less secure in their parenting roles, having high expectations of behavior or performance. Some are just simply uncomfortable with the idea of movement.

The first rule is to always be prepared for the unexpected. First timers are given a handout of helpful hints and tips to enable the flow of the class. I instill a sense of silence in between activities. This gives the children time to process what they have just heard and make the transitions calm and productive. Children come away confident, with new musical and social skills — turn taking, being part of a group, and having a safe vehicle for self-expression.

Participation is a hot topic. Most children are kinesthetic learners. Some learn by doing, some by watching. I have to remind the adults that observation is a valid form of participation. Often parents want to see results with the child doing, doing, doing. I find the child that sits and just watches, taking it all in, may get more out of the program than the child that is doing, doing, doing. Children should be able to join in when they are ready. I gently encourage but never push.

Accepting children where they are developmentally and not comparing them to other children will go a long way. As a young parent, I realized I had to accept my children for what they were not, as much as for what they were. This breakthrough, while they were still young, saved us all a lot of therapy.

As an educator and grandmother, I have a lot of opinions on parenting. With parents being their child's first and favorite toy, making music together is a time to be fully enjoyed. I ask my families, for 60 minutes a week, to leave their expectations at the back door, to let their children be and experience the music in their own way and on their own time frame. Sounds simple, but this can be difficult, especially with so much pressure and hype from the media to make our children smarter and faster. It helps to remember that these children are only 1-2-3-4-5 years old.



If I see an adult struggling, I will take them aside and offer some suggestions to make the time together more enjoyable. I emphasize that they are the parent, but this is my experience and perhaps they might give it a try. Some are able, some simply cannot, and the beat goes on. Often there are cultural mores that affect the way the parent interacts.

What is the main goal of the program? Fun, of course, but this is serious music making. The fun can't happen if the adults are chit chatting with each other. The children can't listen to me or to the music if their adult is talking to them. To help with this listening process, we put on our listening ears, and zip zip zip our lips.

Listening skills are critical for learning and even the babies learn to listen. Our society has become very visually oriented, with babies being put in front of computers younger and younger. Research tells us this is not good for brain or visual development.

Making music requires no expense and can transform cranky to calm in an instant, helping parents get through challenging situations. Everyone is busy. Music can be your best friend. A simple song can help slow things down, bring everyone together, and give your children a gift of lifelong memories.



So, when all else fails, try singing and dancing. It really works!  
Put on a waltz and bring out the scarves.  
Share laughter, hugs and more.

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*Gari Stein is the founder and director of Music For Little Folks (little-folks-music.com) in Ann Arbor and has 30 years of experience with early childhood education. She is the author of Sing With Me: A Music Curriculum and The More We Get Together: Nurturing Relationships Through Music, Play, Books and Art. She can be reached at garistein@aol.com or 734-741-1510.*

**“Shouldn't childhood be a journey, not a race?  
What's the hurry?”**