

What Role Does Music Play in Godly Play?

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Music is everywhere. It has been with us since the beginning of time. It is in the movement of the leaves, the sound of the water crashing or murmuring in streams, and it is in the birds' rituals as well as their songs, so it is also in the Godly Play classroom. It is there in the humming, the movement, the bubbling of voices, the cries of delight, the quiet sweep of a paintbrush. It is everywhere, like in the creation.

In a Godly Play classroom music is considered one of the expressive arts, like painting or sculpting with clay, for children to use to reflect on the feelings stirred and discoveries made. The use of art in Godly Play requires a nuanced and delicate balancing of an emphasis on expression with respect for the art used. This balance always tips in favour of honest expression and away from art as the product of a skilled activity. True play, as play, does not have a product. Being at play with God is done for itself

Sometimes in art classes and in religious education teachers use their adult creativity to pre-packaged "art" for children "to make," as a way of teaching. to give children a sense of success, and to impress their parents. From a Godly Play point of view these "canned art responses" block the children's expression of their personal feelings and discoveries. What children really need is support from adult mentors so they can express themselves without being inhibited by the impression that their art is not good enough. It is always good enough, when it is an honest attempt to express their deep feelings and discoveries.

Godly Play involves the children's experience of God and their existential discoveries with classical Christian language by means of the creative process. Children learn to create meaning while they are learning the language. The goal is for them to internalize a working model of the Christian language system by the time they enter adolescence. Godly Play, then, is not a whole ministry with children and families. A complete ministry involves such activities as participating in children's choirs, working with adults in service projects to help other people, participating in children's liturgies, playing parts in pageants and in musicals about the Bible, participating in field trips, going to parties, playing games or just visiting with friends at the church. There is ample opportunity to learn a lot about music in the context of such a ministry. Godly Play does not need to duplicate this.

This is not to say that music is considered unimportant or excluded from the Godly Play experience. That is not only absurd but impossible. Music helped our species survive. The interplay of music with our evolving brains helped create six kinds of songs that enhanced survival and created human nature over the millennia. Daniel J. Levitin argued in his 2008 book, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature*, that the six kinds of songs are; songs of friendship, joy, comfort, knowledge, religion, and love. These music-created traits overlapped and supported each other to create us and they are still needed today to sustain us when we are at our best, but music is not the only way to provide support for these important human qualities.

A Godly Play classroom benefits from and supports the bonding of the community of children, sharing joy and sorrow, seeking comfort, remembering significant knowledge, engaging in religious ritual, and both modeling and encouraging a kind of love that creates and cares for others. It does this through the Godly Play method, the curriculum and by its

three intangibles --- being open to God, supporting the children's play, and the interplay between the spiral of learning and child development. When Godly Play is truly present these traits that music helped develop over the millennia are there. Sometimes, however, direct, honest and deep conversations in the circle are more important than singing. Singing is often used in religious education to bond the children, to quiet them, to memorize texts, interpret texts, and to keep the teacher in control. In a Godly Play classroom this other-directed approach to music is not needed and even works against the children's personal and self-directed wondering, the creating of their own interpretations, their own sense of community coming from within themselves, their openness to God, and their deep play. Beside, there is little enough time to explore the parables, the sacred stories, the materials and lessons about liturgical action and to engage in contemplative silence that permeates the whole class without adding anything else.

Music in the Godly Play classroom is happily encouraged, but it needs to come from the children and not be *imposed* by the adults, since it is one of the *expressive* arts. For example, sometimes music erupts spontaneously in the class, especially during the feast and the prayers. It gives voice to God's presence and the sadness or delight in the community of children. When the children feel they need to sing, they sing. If they have trouble doing this then the storyteller helps them find a way to express what they feel. This is how music, as an expressive art, becomes deeply grounded in the children's play and openness to God. For example in Boston last Easter (2008) the older children in Cheryl Minor's class were so happy they wanted to do something to express their joy. "Couldn't we sing something," they asked. *They* then decided they would sing a song they had learned in the children's choir. The class members in the choir led the others to sing a piece that was mostly "alleluias," so the other children could easily follow. Such feelings don't need to be "created" by adults by singing about them. They are already there. It is how to express them in music that the children need to learn.

Sometimes when music is written for children's songbooks it interprets the lessons for the children and then reinforces this imposed meaning by group singing. For example, the Young Children and Worship people in the United States and Canada have produced a songbook, which for all its non-Godly-Play merits, still works against the wondering of the children and blocks their own construction of meaning. In addition music written for children is often not deep enough to truly express their joy and sadness. It is too uniformly cheery, cute, and trivial. What children really need is music they can grow on.

Sometimes children can be introduced to Taize in the larger ministry of the church or school. This is music that invites the Holy Spirit to come and play and does *not* interpret scripture but can give children a way to move closer to God, as they create their own existential meaning. From 3-6 years many of the Taize songs, the ones which are canons and made up mostly of repeated phrases, can be easily learned, line-by-line. When children are provided with this possibility during other times in the ministry of the church then such music can break out in the circle during the feast or at other times. When the children are older this same music can be sung as rounds so their authentic quest for God and theological meaning becomes harmony without turning the Godly Play feast into a music lesson.

In Houston during 2008 individual children in a 3-6 year old class sang prayers during the feast about 30% of the time, but this was primarily because some of the children were accustomed to singing the "Johnnie Appleseed" prayer at home. The home as well as church choirs and congregational singing can furnish children with the means to express themselves

in music. Singing in the home and in church needs to be encouraged b Godly Play and not replaced by it.

Over the last several decades, many adults have suggested that a Godly Play songbook be written and that Orf instruments be used by the children to accompany themselves. This misses the point. Godly Play is not a class for making children's music about the church. It is part of a great tradition of church music that is already present. It is better to give children music as deep as it is accessible, so they can sing it all their lives and in old age be comforted by it, even if they can no long speak.

The role of music in the Godly Play classroom has been debated since Godly Play began. This discussion, of more than 36 years, has not been uninformed. For example Thea Berryman, the co-founder of Godly Play, was trained at Westminster Choir College in Princeton and has been a Montessori music teacher for over 35 years. We have tried singing with the children accompanied with my guitar, playing recorded music, setting up listening stations with ear phones, urging the children to use Orf instruments, and to write their own music, using the Montessori bells. Even in our two-hour research classes, it was found that children need too much direct training and supervision to express themselves in music and the sound of what they do create often distracts the other children, but this conversation still continues. For example, a key participant is Cheryl Minor, an Episcopal priest and Godly Play trainer, who graduated from Boston University in music education. Much of her professional life has been devoted to music both in the church and beyond it. She works each Sunday in a Godly Play classroom, despite being the rector of a parish, and contributes much from her experience. The conversation about the role of music in Godly Play has shown that the question is not a simple one about whether to include or exclude music. It is about how best to use music to give children a way to express their feelings and their discoveries as they learn the art of how to use the Christian language system well.