

HEALTH + DEVELOPMENT/BEHAVIOR + DISCIPLINE

# The Benefits of Music on Your Child's Development

How instrumental instruction and performance boost learning and social-emotional strengths in kids

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When people talk about high-stakes testing in schools, they are usually referring to the emphasis placed on kids' scores. But another aspect of standardized testing may have even bigger impacts on our kids' success. Subjects that get tested get funded, so when budgets are tight, the arts – especially expensive instrumental music programs – can be the first to go. It's a short-sighted decision that can have long-term effects on the quality of our kids' education. It turns out, you really want to see your kid's brain on music.

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[Research](https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED529766.pdf) (<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED529766.pdf>) shows that children who receive arts education score higher in math and reading, and develop stronger critical and creative thinking skills. Arts education can even improve media literacy, because we are exposed daily to advertising and political messages that are crafted by artists to affect us in specific ways. For all these academic reasons, the arts – defined as theater, dance, visual arts and music – are recognized as core subjects in Washington state. But the most significant benefits of arts education extend beyond academic performance to the way the arts help us develop as people.

“Art is what makes humans unique from other creatures,” says Kelsey Thompson, band director at [The Bear Creek School](https://www.tbcs.org/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content) ([https://www.tbcs.org/?utm\\_source=parentmap&utm\\_medium=web&utm\\_content=sponsored-content](https://www.tbcs.org/?utm_source=parentmap&utm_medium=web&utm_content=sponsored-content)), an independent preschool–grade 12 school in Redmond. “We create from a very young age, and unfortunately I think we lose some of that as we grow up. Cultivating that creative side in kids all the way through school is what we hope will help them continue to be creators as adults. I think you'll find that teachers push music for music's sake, not for the math test score.”

As social-emotional learning (SEL) has become more common in schools, educators have found that the arts are already fully integrated with SEL principles. In the wake of a year of remote learning that put many music programs on hold and challenged kids' social development and emotional well-being, the natural points of connection between music instruction and SEL are especially valuable.

"Art elicits an emotional response at a very basic level," says Thompson. Quality arts instruction encourages kids to examine that response and to develop self-awareness as they improve their own performance.

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"If we're rehearsing a song, we might play just a couple measures of the song and then stop and ask, 'How did that go for you? What do you need to fix?' Music teachers are constantly asking those kinds of self-reflective questions in class and it's forcing students to think in a different way than in their other classes," says Thompson.

Learning an instrument also encourages self-regulation. While practicing, students learn to manage emotions such as frustration with a challenging piece of music. They also learn to manage the anxiety that precedes performance, first in class and eventually in public. When students go beyond solo instrument practice to join an ensemble, the SEL benefits are even greater, because it is an inherently social activity.

"Performing arts classes like drama and music involve a team. Like team sports, one person's performance affects everyone else's performance. Learning how to navigate that is super, super important because it translates to the workplace directly," says Thompson.

In ensemble music classes like orchestra and band, students learn to hold themselves responsible to the bigger group. There's no hiding in the back of the classroom, either, and the experience of participating fully in music class makes speaking up in other classes easier, too. Since everyone hits a wrong note sometimes, students learn to fail publicly and move on. Self-reflection, teamwork, and shared failures and successes are also the recipe for empathy. Participating in ensemble music is basically practice

for living in society, with the added benefit of content learning.

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“A strong music program starts in kindergarten,” says Thompson. While instrumental music is rarely offered before middle school, students who learn general music in elementary school have an advantage in understanding the nature of ensemble music, learning to read music and careful listening. But as important as musical progress is, the sound of an ensemble performance is not the surest sign of a quality music program. Thompson says the most important indicator is the kids themselves.

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“If the students are enjoying the experience, the teacher is probably doing a good job of making relationships through music, rather than simply teaching music,” says Thompson. “Encourage the squawking and encourage the squeaks because that’s how they get better.” The point is not perfection, it’s growth — another important SEL lesson. The listening experience at a middle school Christmas concert may be a far cry from Handel’s “Messiah” at Seattle Symphony, but at this stage, the sound is not the most important part of the performance. Remember, three months ago many of them didn’t even know how to hold their instruments.

“Yes, the performance piece is really important, but it should be about sharing their learning. Kids are excited to show their parents what they’ve learned,” says Thompson. So, if you want to support your child’s musical education, hold off on the musical criticism and express interest instead.

“Celebrating the journey may be the most important thing a parent can do to encourage their kid in music,” says Thompson. Ask questions about what they are learning in class. Even singing along to the radio and sharing your own imperfect voice is encouraging.

Of course, parents can only celebrate the journey if kids continue on it, and kids can be reluctant to practice.

“At the beginning, I think external motivators are important. Twelve-year-olds don’t always have intrinsic motivation,” says Thompson. The old guideline of 30 minutes daily will result in rapid progress. But Thompson cautions that it isn’t realistic for most families. It’s better to establish and reward a sustainable practice schedule than to fight over a too-ambitious one. It may take a while to establish a strong practice routine, but once kids start to see improvement, they are less likely to resist practice.

And Thompson promises that there will be improvement if your child sticks with it.

“Only about 5 percent of the population has true tone deafness. Kids are born musicians, and it’s our job as teachers to encourage that in them. And even if your family has no musical talent, it doesn’t have any bearing on the ability to enjoy and make music.”

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Regardless of academic impacts and inborn talent, as long as you are human, learning to make music is valuable for its own sake.

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