

# **Can parents influence children's music preferences and positively shape their development?**

*Dr Hauke Egermann*

## **Introduction**

Listening to music is a ubiquitous experience. Most of us listen to music every day while we are at work, commuting, with friends, or just alone at home. In fact, according to an international survey of 10,000 parents, 73% listen to music every single day. But what motivates so many people to spend such a significant amount of their time during the day listening to music?

When conducting a literature review on different studies that listed reasons why people choose to engage in music, Schäfer et al. (2013) identified over 500 different functions of music listening. Listening to music plays an important role in our lives by helping us reach a desired emotional state, it connects us to other people, and it helps us express our identity. While our general interest in music may be something innate and not entirely through learned experience, our ability to use music to regulate our emotions and express our identity is something we acquire during our development. It could therefore be argued that the ability to choose and use music is an essential human skill that starts developing early in childhood. Parents often ensure that their children grow up in the best possible environment for their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development. Therefore, with music having a strong emotional and social impact, it is arguably important for parents to provide their children with an optimal musical environment.

This literature review, which was commissioned by music streaming service Deezer, will illustrate how parents can have a positive impact on the development of their children by exposing them to a variety of different music genres. I will review literature that describes how music preferences are developed, what emotional and social functions music interest serve, and how parents can shape their children's taste in music. I will show how, supported by parents, children can have a broader knowledge, familiarity, and appreciation of many different music styles which may have a positive impact on their development. I hypothesise that music will improve their skills for emotion regulation, ability to bond with other people, and express their own identity.

## **Music Preferences and Music Functions**

How do we come to like some music genres and dislike other music genres? Many studies have looked at determinants of music preferences (for a review see Lamont & Greasley, 2010). Here,

the following four factors have been regularly described as factors influencing our music preferences:

### 1. *Listener personality*

First of all, our personality often determines what we listen to. For example, listeners who are extroverted are more likely to prefer energetic and rhythmic music, and people who are open to new experiences are more likely to prefer more reflective and complex music (Rentfrow, et al., 2003).

### 2. *Emotional Impact and Emotion Regulation*

Music has been shown to induce a variety of emotions through several different induction mechanisms. Some emotions are based on innate responses to simple musical characteristics (e.g. loudness, tempo, or timbre), and other emotions are based on learned associations between music and other emotional non-musical stimuli (Juslin & Västfjäll, 2008). Based on these induction mechanisms, listeners often prefer music that induces a desirable emotional state in them. This is because music is often used for emotion regulation (Saarikallio, 2008). Here, for example, listeners sometimes choose positive music (e.g. music that sounds happy) that improves their mood, but at other times listeners also use negative music (e.g. music that sounds sad and angry) to support the processing of negative emotions (Brattico, et al., 2016).

### 3. *Social Identity*

In the process of socialisation, people use music as a tool for *social identity formation*. When people are bonding, music preferences are often topics of conversations (Rentfrow & Gosling 2006). The more similar two people's music taste is, the more likely these two people will bond because they will likely share similar human values (Boer et al. 2011). This is because musical genres are associated with certain human characteristics. According to North and Hargreaves (1999), adolescents use music as a "badge" for their social identity that communicates something about their self-concepts and identities. For example, fans of chart pop were shown to be perceived with stereotypes of lower education levels, being female, or being less unconventional. On the other hand listening fans of classical music were shown to be perceived as having higher education levels, being male, or being more traditional. The study of North and Hargreaves stimulated several other investigations into these stereotypical social structures that are associated with fans and performers of different music genres. Here, it was shown, that those genres were usually linked to certain demographics (e.g. age, education, sex), values, personality traits, ethnicities, clothing styles, and

various other personal qualities (e.g., attractiveness, trustworthiness, or friendliness). Thus, one could argue that people listen to genres of music that express characteristics that they most relate to and align with the common social identities in their peer-group.

#### *4. Familiarity and Repetition*

Last but not least, there is also a lot of empirical evidence illustrating that we simply like the music we have been most exposed to. North and Hargreaves (1995) showed that people are more likely to enjoy music that is familiar to them. This finding is similar to Zajonc's (1968) mere exposure effect. Zajonc demonstrated that participants had an increased appreciation for stimuli when they were repeatedly presented to them. This implies that if you repeatedly play a music piece to someone and familiarise them with it, they will be more likely to appreciate it later. There are two possible explanations for this repeated exposure effect: one comes from Zajonc (2001) himself; he assumes that we tend to react positively to things after they were repeated a few times, because we have learned that there are no negative consequences to them (which he calls the "absence of aversive events"). Another explanation of the mere exposure effect states that, through repeated presentation of music to a listener, he or she will form implicit expectations about the musical development through internalising musical patterns and schemata (Huron, 2006). This means that when we listen to music, we are likely to unconsciously predict what will come next in the music. By knowing music well, we can reduce our prediction errors, which could be perceived as rewarding and pleasant.

#### **Parents' Role in Shaping Children's Music Preferences**

Seven-month old infants who are bounced at different rhythms tend to prefer rhythmic patterns most familiar to them (Phillips-Silver & Trainor, 2005). This finding shows how receptive children are to music even when they are very young. In 1982 David Hargreaves conducted a study on music experience and observed that children younger than ten years old tended to be more open to unfamiliar music styles compared to older participants. Subsequent studies then showed that children also enjoyed unfamiliar classical music more when they were younger than 8-10 years old, after which the study observed a decrease in liking of music unfamiliar to them (Gembris, et al., 2014). These observations were then explained through the assumption that children under 10 years old, compared to older children, were more "open-eared". This was likely because those younger children were less strongly enculturated (which means that they were still learning to understand the values and characteristics of their own culture) and were still developing their social identity.

Children's "openness" to music shows that parents do have the opportunity to play an active role in shaping their children's development in a beneficial way. Using the effect of mere exposure

and repeated presentation on preference (Zajonc, 1968) provides an opportunity to positively shape younger children's responses to initially unknown music. By repeatedly playing a diverse selection of different genres to their children, parents can help them develop knowledge of a large repertoire of music that will be beneficial in later life. It is likely that these children will be able to appreciate a larger selection of music. Furthermore, the children will be more likely to use music in a more effective capacity for the two different functions illustrated in the previous section: emotion regulation and social identity formation. However, one should also consider that children might not always remain "open" to their parents' music suggestions: it is very likely that later in adolescence, music will become a vehicle to distance one from their parents, as research shows that during this time peers have a much stronger influence over music choices than family members (Finnäs, 1989).

I therefore suggest that parents should take every opportunity to spend time with their children and explore the world of music together, while children are still open to new and unfamiliar music (which often means being younger than ten years old). This could be through simply putting music on in the background while the child is playing, however it could also be used as a social activity within the family. Here, parents could play a piece of music at home and then talk to their children about it (i.e. share how everyone in the family experiences the music and discuss for example reasons why), or they could take their children to concerts and live music events that create special memories that are remembered positively.

### **Implications and Conclusions**

In this literature review, I have summarised research that shows that music is immensely valuable for human beings. Through engaging with music, we manage to achieve many relevant functions that support us in our everyday lives (e.g. emotion regulation and social identity formation). These faculties are developed very early on in our lives starting as young children. Parents have a special opportunity to support their children's emotional and social development by exposing them to a diverse mix of music. Due to children's responsiveness and the discussed mere exposure effect, it is arguably possible to influence them to enjoy a larger volume of musical genres later in life. I also believe that this will have a multitude of emotional and social benefits for them:

- The children will have a larger and diverse musical repertoire to choose from when selecting music for their personal emotional needs. Therefore, they will be able to use music better and more effectively for emotion regulation by choosing music that supports their desired affective states (e.g. listening to happy music when someone intends to be happy, or listening to stimulating music when one wants to be stimulated). This could then in turn increase their emotional wellbeing and mental health.

- Knowing about a large and diverse musical repertoire will also benefit their social development. The children will be better able to use music for forming their social identity because through knowing more music (and knowing more about music), they will be able to choose more specific music that expresses the values they believe in. It will help them to better integrate and bond with peers as they will have a wider musical listening catalogue to choose from.
- Furthermore, they will also develop 'cultural capital' that will allow them to join in conversations about music and position themselves as knowledgeable about different genres of music. In turn, this can increase their social status – particularly in a Western society where having an understanding of culture is often considered socially desirable.
- Through exposing children to lots of different music, they might learn not only to appreciate and understand the culture of their own country, but also that of others if they are exposed to foreign and unfamiliar music. The children might be more likely so show interest in those cultures and they might be more likely to educate themselves about them.

## References

- Boer, D., R. Fischer, M. Strack, M. H. Bond, E. Lo, and J. Lam. (2011). How shared preferences in music create bonds between people: Values as the missing link. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37, 1159–1171.
- Brattico, E., Bogert, B., Alluri, V., Tervaniemi, M., Eerola, T., & Jacobsen, T. (2016). It's sad but i like it: The neural dissociation between musical emotions and liking in experts and laypersons. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 9, 1–21.
- Finnäs, L. (1989). How can musical preferences be modified? A research review. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 1-58.
- Gembris, H., Heye, A., Jeske, L. (2014). Replikationsstudien bestätigen das Phänomen der Offenohrigkeit im frühen Grundschulalter. *Jahrbuch der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Musikpsychologie*, 24, 100-132.
- Greasley, A. E., & Lamont, A. (2016). Musical preferences. In S. Hallam, I. Cross, M. Thaut (Eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology* (pp. 263-281), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hargreaves, D. J. (1982). The development of aesthetic reactions to music. *Psychology of Music, Special Issue*, 51–54.
- Huron, D. (2006). *Sweet Anticipation*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Juslin, P. N., & Västfjäll, D. (2008). Emotional responses to music: The need to consider underlying mechanisms. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 31(5), 559-575.
- North, A. & Hargreaves D. (1995). Subjective complexity, familiarity, and liking for popular music. *Psychomusicology*, 14, 77–93.
- North, A., & Hargreaves, D (1999). Music and Adolescent Identity. *Music Education Research*, 1(1), 75–92.
- Rentfrow, P. J., & Gosling, S. D. (2003). The Do Re Mi's of everyday life: The structure and personality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(6), 1236–1256.
- Rentfrow, P. J. & Gosling, S. D. (2006). Message in a ballad: The role of music preferences in interpersonal perception. *Psychological Science*, 17(3), 236-242.
- Saarikallio, S. H. (2008). Music in mood regulation: Initial scale development. *Musicae Scientiae*, 12(2), 291-309.

- Schäfer, T., Sedlmeier, P., Städtler, C., & Huron, D. (2013). The psychological functions of music listening. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4, 511.
- Zajonc, R. B. (1968). Attitudinal effects of mere exposure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 9(2), 1–27.
- Zajonc, R. B. (2001). Mere exposure: A gateway to the subliminal. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 10(6), 224–228.