



Instrumental for development!

While classical dance opens kids up from within, music allows them to listen to and learn new sounds. To find out how this happens with younger children, M&B decided to check out the Little Ustaads programme – a classical music class for babies in the age-group of zero to five years! We joined a group of enthusiastic parents and children as young as six months and three years for a session at the Toddler Activity Centre, Mumbai.

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Rachna Chandaria-Mamania, director of TAC, tells us how she conceived the idea and why it's important. "Basically, it was an idea which came up between me and my partner Kavita. She is trained in Indian classical dance and I'm trained in Western classical music. We both believe that music is very important for small children from the age of three months or from birth really. Because we are so into music, we know that there's a lot of Western musical influence in nursery rhymes, action songs, etc. But Indian classical music is so good and it's a dying art so we wanted to educate children as well as parents about it in a very simple



way. Basics such as what is sa re ga ma, introduce them to different sounds, different instruments, what is taal, what is raaga, etc. I feel it would create a lot of interest especially in times like today when parents are looking to go back to their roots and traditions and to inculcate them in their children although they themselves don't have an idea about it," says Rachna.

So Rachna and Kavita devised the entire programme, right from recording and producing the music, writing the lyrics and putting together a set of mini-size instruments for children. In March 2009, the programme was launched. The therapeutic benefits of music have long been discovered on babies while they're in the womb itself. But can you actually get a

baby in diapers to listen? "It is a very young age to start," Rachna agrees. "But that's the age when they actually observe the most. We have babies who came when they were three months and are now six and eight months. They recognise the music; their eyes just open when they hear the sounds. It's amazing to see how they hold the baby-size instrument and play with it. They understand that if they shake it, it will produce a sound. We have one-and-a-half-year-olds who know sa re ga ma pa da ni sa and understand what teen taal is. Our flashcards and instruments are child-friendly. Our songs are about all the things children can relate to like the moon, the environment, blooming flowers or good things you eat and drink and about time," she explains.

IN SESSION

Rachna explains how the programme has been structured to make it appealing to the parents and babies alike. "The session structure changes level-wise. We follow different raagas in each level. Level one is based on raag bilaval, level two on bhairav, and level three on raag bhopali. We also have songs on Indian nationalism, flags and our country. We use different music pieces like the sound of the tabla, santoor, sarod or violin, so they understand the different rhythms of the beats and the sounds.

Typically, there are two teachers and about 12 students in a class. The teacher who conducts the session is trained in Indian classical music. Rachna says, "We always give them something to play with and to understand the concepts like giving and sharing, taking things and putting them away. Then we move on to the raag, we take them through sa re ga ma pa da ni sa, then into the action song of the week which will either be through actions, visuals or puppets so they are following coordination. We teach them teen taal through clapping, sticks or counting on their fingers. Then we have the jamming time where we open the big black box of instruments so the children can get to play with all the instruments like ektara, ghungroos, tablas, dholaks, etc. After that, we have story time because we want to incorporate either values or morals, even Hindi nursery rhymes which we do through flashcards or puppets. We try to get them to identify the music by playing a piece." Ginita, who conducts the class at Walkeshwar, Mumbai, feels that when these children grow older they will recognise these tunes and appreciate them. "Through these sessions our tradition will be kept alive. They will develop the ability to listen to Indian classical music. Once they develop the interest, they can take it up when they are older," she says.

Why Indian classical music is good for your child

- It opens her listening skills to all kinds of sounds.
- It teaches her a lot about respect, different values and traditions, learning how to greet, to listen and follow instructions.
- Through the use of instruments, her hand-eye coordination improves. **M&B**