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Teaching Early Childhood Music in the Time of COVID-19: Implementing Guidance and Suggestions for Birth-3rd Grade

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Preface

As you incorporate these guidelines and suggestions into your teaching practices, we encourage you to use the following four concepts as lenses to guide your interpretation: diversity, equity, inclusion, and access. Student and family identities are intersectional and include: race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, religion/spirituality, nationality, and socioeconomic status (Tatum, 2000). *Diversi*ty in action could mean using songs, images, texts, and picture books that reflect the identities of students you teach and also introduce your students to new peoples, musics, places, and ideas. *Inclusive* music educators meet students where they are, offering supports and challenges that invite each student to learn and grow. Inclusive music educators collaborate with families and teams of educators to ensure that children are motivated to learn, can access information, and have multiple ways to participate. The concept of *Equity* moves beyond "equal treatment" to intentionally redressing harms and subverting structures that have resulted in some musics, musicians, and musical processes being prevalent and others being silenced in music classrooms. Music educators must ensure that they are researching and correctly crediting those who created and transmitted the music and that they are not using music with racist origins or connotations. Teachers pursuing equity often deliberately showcase underrepresented performers, songwriters, composers, and musics throughout their curriculum. Finally, teachers must attend to issues of *Access*—ensuring that all learners can engage with and benefit from instruction. Creating ways to engage families who have varying levels of technology and varied comfort with "cameras on" instruction is one way that teachers can support access to instruction. The four lenses often intersect or overlap. For example, adapting for the needs of students with disabilities when designing online instruction could be considered as work toward diversity, equity, inclusion, *and* access depending on what strategies teachers apply or what goals teachers are prioritizing.

Throughout this guidelines document and the accompanying context-specific guidance, we have sought to affirm the importance of working together as children, families, and teachers to continue to find ways to joyfully make music together during the time of COVID-19, embracing the ideals of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access. Jazzmone Sutton, an elementary general music teacher in Wake County Public Schools, NC, summarized it this way: "The key is flexibility so that all can participate with their best effort." Each part of Ms. Sutton's sentence is crucial: **"flexibility"** means being open to changing how we have done things in the past as well as changing our plans if something we try doesn't work on the first round. **"All"** reminds us that all children have the right to music in their lives and music education. **"Participate"** is an active verb, reminding teachers that we seek to engage our students and families as partners. Finally, **"best effort"** encapsulates the understanding that we, as teachers, must all try for our best in changing and sometimes tumultuous circumstances and spend time communicating with children and families so we understand the contexts that will support "best effort" and the goals toward which students and families might direct their "best effort."

To become more inclusive, affect positive change to address inequities, and work toward anti-racism in early childhood music education, teachers must work in partnership with caregivers and families. Seeking and implementing input from families and students shifts the focus from teacher-directed instruction, begins to dismantle the power structures, and leads to a more diverse and inclusive music learning environment. Families' home music cultures and experiences should be celebrated, affirmed, and incorporated in the music learning environment whether in-person, hybrid, or online.

Reference
Tatum, B. D. (2000). The complexity of identity:"Who am I?". *Readings for diversity and social justice, 2,* 5-8.

Moving Forward Teaching Early Childhood Music in the Time of COVID-19

Know the Guidelines for Your Locations. While potentially daunting, it is important to read carefully the guidance provided for teachers that may be available at your center, school, district, county AND state levels. The recommendations provided in this document should always be applied within the context of current local guidance. If you teach in more than one center, school, district, county, or state be sure that you are tracking relevant guidance for each setting in which you teach. As you review guidance, be alert to how your students from varying socio-economic status backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, and communities may be impacted.

Be Proactive. Gather information and create draft plans.
- *Focus on knowledgeable people and those who make decisions.* Set up appointments with the people who know relevant policies, and find out what they recommend. Make plans for various scenarios: remember that it's likely different locales will take different approaches and also that situations may change rapidly among various in-person, hybrid, and online approaches.
- *Communicate with administration.* Take your plans with you to meetings with administrators to contribute to a collaborative discussion about how music instruction will continue to be a vibrant part of children's lives in the spaces where you work.
- *Partner with families.* We are in a two-way partnership with families, now more than ever. Ask families about their goals for their child's music education and how you can work with them. Information may be collected through verbal checks, individuals meetings, google forms, emails, etc. Let families know how music instruction is continuing, and that you are committed to each child's musical success, health and well-being.
- *Be an advocate for access and equity.* Join an online group or speak with your colleagues to critically evaluate how reopening plans may impact families within your community. If you anticipate needing technology or equipment to provide access to instruction, ask the school, parent-teacher organization, or a community foundation for assistance ensuring equitable distribution of those resources. Consult with families and the special education team about how supports from student IEPs will be integrated in new learning plans.

Consider Your Own Safety and Comfort. Remember that you can be more cautious than local guidance recommends, and each of us brings a deep understanding of our specific teaching context, activities, and needs. For example, if your school is allowing children to take off their masks when they are in their home classroom, you can ask that students wear their masks for music class because it is safer if they will be chanting or singing. Communication is key, and your safety and the safety of students and families is of paramount importance.

Lead with Positive Energy. It's OK to mourn what we can't do for the time being. But as we consider how to move forward, it's vital to model our dedication to the importance of what we do. Therefore, even as we accept that things will likely be in flux for a while, we also know that music education remains important and possible no matter what the situation. We can weather change by remaining grounded in our values and confident in our ability to work together with children, families, colleagues, and administrators to find solutions.

Overview of Settings

In the home: To offer the most powerful route to sustained music engagement, caregivers should notice, invite, and model joyful and creative musicking. These activities - which include singing, rhythmically chanting, moving, creating, improvising, making and manipulating a variety of sounds and materials, and talking about children's music interests, preferences, and ideas - should become part of everyday interactions and routines. As noted below, singing can have limits in-person; therefore, as teachers, encourage families to sing and chant extensively together at home. While listening to recorded music plays a role in children's musical development, musical interaction with others is even more important. The role of caregivers in the musical development of their children, while always crucial, is even more so at this time.

In the Daycare or School setting: Daycare settings and schools, in some geographic areas, are open. Children must be provided appropriate music experiences throughout the day in these settings as in the home. However, singing with children in this setting in ways we have typically engaged is NOT recommended due to research results indicating the transmission of COVID-19 through aerosolized particles that can be the result of singing. Teachers are encouraged to play recordings of children as well as adults singing so students may continue to have healthy vocal models and access to a broad range of vocal repertoire. In rare situations where students are behind plexiglass barriers and wearing masks, teachers may consider having children sing. Any instruments, or music manipulatives, should only be used if you can sanitize them after use before being used by another child. For example, scarves should be used once and then washed in hot water. For example, guidance about singing during COVID-19 is complex and changing and includes considerations about spacing, ventilation, and length of time singing. Additional information that may be helpful can be found at:

Fall 2020 Guidance for Music Education

Virtual opportunities: Many teachers in early childhood music programs as well as PreK-3rd grade music teachers are offering Zoom classes or recorded classes in lieu of in-person teaching. While these provide little personal interaction with children, they do provide some and set the stage for the types of music engagement children and families can continue at home.

Hybrid models: Some teachers, particularly in early childhood music programs, are offering in-person group classes in well-ventilated, large indoor spaces and/or outdoor environments. In some cases, these are shorter in-person classes followed by virtual opportunities. In other cases, hybrid refers to some children participating in-person while other children are participating online. Hybrid models require careful planning to ensure equitable access. For example, if a class is outside, will every child's supports transfer to that setting (e.g., a speaker system for a child who needs sound amplification)? If half of a group is online and half is in-person, how will you ensure access to all activities for those who are not physically present? Work with your school administrative and intervention teams to ensure equitable access for all students.

Navigating the Guidance and Suggestions Document

Using Google Sheets, we have created a guidance and suggestions document regarding safety related to teaching context and activity that includes suggestions for strategies that may work in your setting. The document is organized using tabs that are located at the bottom of the sheet. The first tab is "Suggested Safety Guidelines." Then, there are tabs offering guidance and activities suggestions for Community Building and the Whole Child, Singing, Movement, Instruments, Listening. On each of the activities tabs, the first row is a reiteration of the safety guidelines. The final tab provides links to webinars, research studies, helpful websites, state- and method-specific guidance and ideas that also may be helpful. We will update this document at least monthly and welcome suggestions. Please email the Early Childhood Music COVID-19 Guidance team (ecmguidance@gmail.com) with your resources or ideas.

Setting Caregivers and Families Up for Success in Remote/Hybrid Environments: A Menu of Options

Before Instruction
- Reach out to caregivers to ask them about the kinds of music their child listens to and what kinds of musical experiences are common in the family. Find out about their goals for their child's music learning. After you gather this information, circle back to let families know how you will be including their musics and goals, as well as other materials, and how this aligns with what you are including in your class and why.
- Make a short video about the kinds of materials you might be using. Ask parents and children to work together to create their versions of those items in preparation for class--and to make additional suggestions for fun sound and movement options!
- Provide a synchronous caregiver orientation focused on learning about families' musical goals and concerns for their children and collaborative strategizing regarding any possible barriers such as space, timing, connectivity and work expectations This is also a good chance for parents to test equipment and videoconference services.
- Provide simple explanations (or links) on troubleshooting apps and software.
- Provide one-page handouts (printed or digital) that are visually appealing and provide easy to understand information for caregivers to understand the "whys" and the "hows" of their child's music learning. Teachers should consider getting feedback from families and students on what they think is a successful music learning space and experience, then create the relevant "one-pager." *Suggested Topics:* Setting up your home music space; Shared expectations for music time at home; and Having fun making music together.
- *Infant specific:* Help caregivers understand that the screen is for the caregiver, not the baby. The teacher sets up the activity, the adult watches and then takes that experience to the baby. Class is between the caregiver and baby.
- Build in extra time for your teaching team to be online before instruction begins
- When possible, have a host for virtual classes who is an administrative staff very familiar with the structure of the class. Having a host allows the teacher to focus on the music education aspect without being worried about technology.
- Seek input from families to create a menu of options for at-home learning that will work for a variety of home contexts. Work to become more conscious of the rich music experiences and environments in the students' home that can be incorporated into lessons.

During Instruction
- Your "set" for videoing your class should be in a consistent place for each lesson so that children know what to expect. For fun, you could change something in the background and ask children "what has changed since last time."
- Begin music time with an activity that incorporates caregivers and students identifying spatial boundaries or other limitations in their current location, and encourages them to make decisions that will allow their best possible participation (e.g., "the baby is sleeping today, so I need to be quiet." Or, "I need to take my mom's phone outside today and do class there so I can move around").
- With older students, encourage children to be aware of their environment as it changes from day to day, practice making decisions about their participation that reflect an awareness of their home environment, and communicate those to the teacher. For instance, if others are learning near them one day, a child might limit their movements to a small area. If the child has more physical and aural space another day, they may indicate to the teacher that they are able to participate more exuberantly. Encouraging caregivers/students to self identify spatial boundaries and other limitations empowers them to adjust to their specific learning environment.
- Acknowledge that each of us, as learners and teachers, have different needs. Just like at school, individuals in our online class will work in different ways. Affirm children's and families' ability to work with you toward your shared goals.

After Instruction
- Send follow up information for adult caregivers so that the interactive process can continue at home after the lesson. At the end of each lesson give a "preview" of coming attractions, or announce what music activity might be next, etc.
- If lessons are live, educators/practitioners can provide lesson summaries or recording for those unable to attend live sessions.

Technology Tips for Remote/Hybrid Instruction with Children Birth-4

Affirming Varied Needs with Regard to "Camera On"
- For a variety of reasons, some children and families will not be able or willing to use a camera during instruction. Affirming this choice and working to provide relevant and equitable instruction for all children will foster participation and learning.
- As a teacher, position the camera to capture action of the whole room.

Interactive Platforms
- Consult local tech support for how to improve quality of music sound on your platform.
- Use an unlisted video streaming playlist (accessible only for caregivers) to post musical activities.
- When using a live streaming/video function, encourage family suggestions through the chat function
- To help children feel connected with each other, set video conferencing view so children can see one another, if they are using a camera.
- Consider using an app or service to share pictures of children and learning with families
- Educators/practitioners could use a digital classroom/platform for students/families to provide links to apps, websites, and short recorded videos all in one place.

Class Duration
- Younger children (Birth-age 3): For interactive caregiver/child classes, aim for 20-30 minute classes using an interactive platform with caregivers actively participating. For teacher-child classes in daycare or school settings, shorter experiences may be more appropriate. Consider supplementing with asynchronous materials.
- Older children (Age 3 and older): Longer interactive classes up to 45 minutes may be appropriate, especially if there are other children or adults participating alongside/with the student. Teachers could also offer shorter in-person meetings supplemented with asynchronous materials that caregivers, teachers, and children can access when they wish.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) suggested that *interactive* screen engagement (e.g., with a live teacher interacting on screen) along with *joint attention* from a parent or caregiver is acceptable for children of all ages. Note that when AAP discusses limiting screen time, they often are referring to passive screen use (e.g., television programs, movies) and apps/video games. The new world of "video chatting" and interaction with an actual person is under-researched but AAP recognizes it as different from passive media use.

"Problems begin when media use displaces physical activity, hands-on exploration and face-to-face social interaction in the real world, which is critical to learning." (see "American Academy of Pediatrics Announces New Recommendations for Children's Media Use") The above class length recommendations do not describe passive screen time--these recommended times are for interactive musical engagement "chatting" back and forth. For young children, it is important that caregivers (in home, care, or school contexts) foster joint attention and active engagement among children and caregivers in the room even as the online instructor provides live, interactive musical and pedagogical guidance. Children should be actively engaged in a variety of musical activities: moving creatively (in self-space and through the room), chanting and singing, creating songs and stories, etc.

See: Policy Statement from The American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Communications and Media. (2016). Media and young minds. *Pediatrics*, *138*(5), e20162591.

Going Low Tech
- At times, consider going low-tech, such as asking children to write rhythm patterns on a piece of paper; search for sound objects in the home and share them.
- Consider sending materials that parents could print (if they wish) with very clear links to recordings or videos that teachers deem appropriate.

Interaction
- Foster interaction by inviting all families to allow viewing of children, while emphasizing that families should participate in a way that works for them, which may mean cameras off at times.
- Older children can share pictures and videos with private sharing apps or sites.
- Use free or paid apps on touch tablet devices to allow students to respond or engage musically using "digital" instruments.
- Students can respond to learning through online programs to compose musical ideas.
- Change the screen names to children's names in video platforms so teacher and families get to know student names.
- Encourage caregivers who are co-participants to interact with you and their child(ren).
- Let children and families know about keeping themselves on mute until it is a good time, why this is important, and how sometimes you will mute someone or ask everyone to check that they are muted.
- Use the unmute option selectively to assess children.
- Remember the two-way dialogue: Invite feedback from caregivers about how the experience is going, observations of childrens' musicking, and suggestions for improvement of delivery; share your observations about musical interaction and growth and ideas for the class.

Suggested Citations

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