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Moving to the Beat - with Drum Circles By Stephanie Starkebaum and Sheila Gains, Family and Consumer Science Specialists

Children love music and they love to move, so let's put them together and create a fun family drum circle! A drum circle is just what it sounds like, children and adults sitting in a circle with a drum or flat surface to drum or tap their hands on. Drumming is a form of non-verbal communication that can improve social and emotional well-being as well as enhance the physical, and cognitive development of children.

Drum circles encourage play while giving your child a chance to express him or herself through rhythmic energy. Think about it as communicating and exercising their brains and bodies through beats within a social setting. When children listen to music or rhythms, they can feel it both physically and emotionally, especially when they are able to dance, bang on a drum, or tap their feet to the beat.

The Full Body Effect of Drumming

Research shows that rhythmic beats help harmonize the left and right parts of your brain. This leads to an increase in neuronal connections to all parts of the brain.

Drumming Helps Children:

- Improve eye/hand coordination
- Develop coordinated large motor skills
- Increase strength and endurance of hands, arms, and the whole body
- Enhance balance, vision, and awareness skills
- Fine tune listening skills, as they notice rhythm and tempo changes
- Be creative and express emotions



Learning to recognize and move to a rhythm, helps children organize events and patterns. These are both important skills for developing language and a perception of time. Did you know children can express themselves physically before they can express themselves with their words? For example, babies can rock to music and bounce to the beat, before they can talk. Several studies have researched the positive effect of music and rhythm on reading, math, and science skills.

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Activity For Health: Teaching Rhythms with Drums

- Gather or make drums – an empty coffee can with a lid, oatmeal or shoe box can be a drum
- Have everyone (children and adults) sit in a circle with a drum in front of them
- Listen to music with a strong beat, practice drumming to the rhythm
- With music turned off, try a follow the leader type of drumming. The leader creates a short rhythm pattern of 3 to 6 beats and repeats it several times, then others try to repeat the beat on their drum
- Let everyone have a chance at leading
- Make sure everyone is looking and listening
- Alternate different sounding drums between children
- Don't talk too much – let the music do the talking
- Play drums in different settings: Outside, inside, and in different rooms. Encourage children to notice how the sounds change



Another fun activity to teach about rhythm is to use animals to represent a variety of rhythms. Have each child make a sound (using their hands or drumsticks) on a drum to mimic the sound of an animal. Perhaps you are on a safari, what would the rhythm of a tiger sound like? How about an elephant, zebra, or a snake? Or use weather examples with drums: Rubbing your hand on the drum to make the sound of wind. Finger tapping can sound like rain drops, and so on. See what other rhythms and sounds children can produce.

Let's Talk

Encourage children to participate in a drumming activity. Let them know how fun it will be to make some noise. Support them as they express their own beat for a while. Then challenge them to follow a beat. Let them know that finding and following a beat takes time, but that you will help them. "Let's all tap our drums to this music". Let them try for a few minutes. Model drumming to the rhythm and ask that they follow your movements. "Do what I do, while we drum to the rhythm."

Communicate to children that the more they practice clapping or drumming to music the better they will get at it. And that finding the beat will make it easier for them to do all kinds of things including reading and learning to play musical instruments.

