

Hand-clapping songs improve motor and cognitive skills, research shows

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"We found that children in the first, second and third grades who sing these songs demonstrate skills absent in children who don't take part in similar activities," explains Dr. Idit Sulkin a member of BGU's Music Science Lab in the Department of the Arts. "We also found that children who spontaneously perform hand-clapping songs in the yard during recess have neater handwriting, write better and make fewer spelling errors."

Dr. Warren Brodsky, the music psychologist who supervised her doctoral dissertation, said Sulkin's findings lead to the presumption that "children who don't participate in such games may be more at risk for developmental learning problems like dyslexia and dyscalculia. There's no doubt such activities train the brain and influence development in other areas. The children's teachers also believe that social integration is better for these children than those who don't take part in these songs."

As part of the study, Sulkin went to several elementary school classrooms and engaged the children in either a board of education sanctioned music appreciation program or hand-clapping songs training -- each lasting a period of 10 weeks.

"Within a very short period of time, the children who until then hadn't taken part in such activities caught up in their cognitive abilities to those who did," she said. But this finding only surfaced for the group of children undergoing hand-clapping songs training. The result led Sulkin to conclude that hand-clapping songs should be made an integral part of education for children aged six to 10, for the purpose of motor and cognitive training.

During the study, "Impact of Hand-clapping Songs on Cognitive and Motor Tasks," Dr. Sulkin interviewed school and kindergarten teachers, visited their classrooms and joined the children in singing. Her original goal, as part of her thesis, was to figure out why children are fascinated by singing and clapping up until the end of third grade, when these pastimes are abruptly abandoned and replaced with sports.

"This fact explains a developmental process the children are going through," Dr. Sulkin observes. "The hand-clapping songs appear naturally in children's lives around the age of seven, and disappear around the age of 10. In this narrow window, these activities serve as a developmental platform to enhance children's needs -- emotional, sociological, physiological and cognitive. It's a transition stage that leads them to the next phases of growing up."

Sulkin says that no in-depth, long-term study has been conducted on the effects that hand-clapping songs have on children's motor and cognitive skills. However,

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the relationship between music and intellectual development in children has been studied extensively, prompting countless parents to obtain a "Baby Mozart" CD for their children.

This study also demonstrates that listening to 10 minutes of Mozart music (.i.e., the 'Mozart Effect') does not improve spatial task performance more than 10 minutes hand clapping songs training or 10 minutes exposure to silence.

Sulkin also found that hand-clapping song activity has a positive effect on adults: University students who filled out her questionnaires reported that after taking up such games, they became more focused and less tense. "These techniques are associated with childhood, and many adults treat them as a joke," she said. "But once they start clapping, they report feeling more alert and in a better mood."

Sulkin grew up in a musical home. Her father, Dr. Adi Sulkin, is a well-known music educator who, in the 1970s and 1980s, recorded and published over 50 cassettes and videos depicting Israeli children's play-songs, street-songs, holiday and seasonal songs, and singing games targeting academic skills.

"So quite apart from the research experience, working on this was like a second childhood," she noted.

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