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Your Health

Sorry, Kids, Piano Lessons Make You Smarter

It's sure to be music to parents' ears: After nine months of weekly training in piano or voice, new research shows young students' IQs rose nearly three points more than their untrained peers.

The Canadian study lends support to the idea that musical training may do more for kids than simply teach them their scales—it exercises parts of the brain useful in mathematics, spatial intelligence and other intellectual pursuits.



AP
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"With music lessons, because there are so many different facets involved—such as memorizing, expressing emotion, learning about musical interval and chords—the multidimensional nature of the experience may be motivating the [IQ] effect," said study author **E. Glenn Schellenberg**, of the University of Toronto at Mississauga.

A decade ago, researchers led by the University of Wisconsin's **Frances Rauscher** found that simply listening to Mozart triggered temporary increases in spatial intelligence.

While the "Mozart Effect" has proven difficult to replicate in subsequent studies, the idea that music or musical training might raise IQ took hold in the scientific community.

In his study, slated for publication in the August issue of *Psychological Science*, Schellenberg offered 12 Toronto-area 6-year-olds free weekly voice or piano lessons at the Royal Conservatory of Music, described by Schellenberg as Canada's "most prestigious music conservatory."

He chose 6-year-olds because their developing brains still retain a large degree of "plasticity," defined as "the ability of the brain to change and adapt to environmental stimuli."

On the other hand, children younger than 6 were deemed less suitable "because you also want the lessons to be rigorous enough, and you can't really start serious musical training with 4-year-olds," he said.

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Schellenberg also wanted to separate out the effect on IQ of training in music per se, from that of training in the arts in general. To do this, he provided a third group of 6-year-olds with free, weekly drama classes. A fourth group of 6-year-olds received no classes during the study period.

The children's IQs were tested beforehand using the full Weschler intelligence test, which assesses various aspects of intellectual function in ten separate areas. All of the children, Schellenberg explained, "came into my lab in the summer before first grade and they had the entire test, which takes about three hours."

Following that initial assessment, the children "went off to first grade and to the four different groups that they were assigned. Then, in between first and second grade, they came back to the lab and were retested."

At the time of retesting, all of the students—even those not enrolled in music or drama classes—displayed increases in IQ of at least 4.3 points, on average, Schellenberg said. "That's just a common consequence of going to school," he said.

Focusing first on the children taking the drama class, Schellenberg found they "didn't differ [in increased IQ] from those in the no-lessons group." However, kids taking the acting class did tend to score higher on aspects of sociability than other children, probably due to the cooperative nature of putting on a play.

The only added boost to IQ came to kids taught either piano or voice. According to Schellenberg, children in the music groups "had slightly larger increases in IQ than the control groups," averaging 7-point gains in their IQ scores from the previous year—2.7 points higher than children placed in either the drama or no-lessons group.

This increase in IQ is considered small but significant, and was evident across the broad spectrum of intelligence measured by the Weschler test, Schellenberg said.

Commenting on the study, Rauscher said, "It certainly supports a lot of the research that we've done in the past." The Canadian researcher's results deviate from her own, she said, "in that they found this effect for general intelligence."

Rauscher's work has tended to focus on music's effects on spatial intelligence—the ability to think through three-dimensional puzzles without resorting to an actual model.

Although it remains a theory, she speculated that "understanding music, particularly learning to translate musical symbols into sound, might be transferring to other abilities, because they are sharing similar neuro pathways."

Both Schellenberg and Rauscher agreed that, ideally, music lessons should be available to children as part of their education.

"We don't have any evidence that music is unique in this regard," Schellenberg said, "but on the other hand, it's certainly not bad for you. Our studies suggest that extracurricular activities are indeed enriching to development."

Unfortunately, adults who might feel emboldened to pick up the guitar or stretch their vocal skills may not receive the same boost to brainpower.

"I really think you'll find the strongest effects for young children," Rauscher said. "That's not to say that you won't find anything in adults, but I think it would be a lot harder and would really take a lot longer."

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