

Boost Memory and Learning with Music

By Cheri Lucas

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When we hear a familiar song, we are often able to recall a moment from our past that is connected to that tune. Favorite songs tickle our memory in various ways; your child may even complain of “getting a song stuck in her head,” which shows that music is easily ingrained in our memory.

Music has been found to stimulate parts of the brain, and studies have demonstrated that music enhances the memory of Alzheimer’s and dementia patients, including a study conducted at UC Irvine, which showed that scores on memory tests of Alzheimer’s patients improved when they listened to classical music.

It’s possible, then, to use music to help your child retain information and enhance learning. Chris Brewer, founder of LifeSounds Educational Services and author of the new book *Soundtracks for Learning*, says sounds can help to hold our attention, evoke emotions, and stimulate visual images. “Students of all ages—that includes adults—generally find that music helps them focus more clearly on the task at hand and puts them in a better mood for learning,” says Brewer.

Brewer calls the use of music throughout the day “positive mood management” and suggests that various styles of music are appropriate for different types of activities. For instance, she recommends using upbeat popular music to motivate learning, especially songs with lyrics that encourage positive thinking. When studying, writing, or reading, play instrumental music to sustain concentration, she says. Classical music of the Baroque era, like Bach, Handel or Mozart work particularly well. “Music can help shift energy levels, too, so playing upbeat music can boost tired minds and bodies while slower, more reflective music helps calm and focus,” says Brewer.

Gaetan Pappalardo, a teacher, writer, and consultant at www.onkidwriting.com, also uses music in a variety of ways, particularly to strengthen language. “You can’t dig out some old, dusty music and expect kids to hop, skip, and jump to the beat,” says Pappalardo. These days, your child is exposed to many genres, from movie soundtracks, video game tunes, and music from Guitar Hero and Rock Band, for instance. If you plan to use music to sharpen memory or enhance a lesson, “you’ve got to meet them halfway,” he says.

We asked Brewer and Pappalardo to suggest activities that use music to boost memory and make learning more sensory or interactive. Here are their top tips:

- **Embark on a “learning journey.”** Play reflective, meditative music while you verbally lead your child on an imaginative journey related to an academic topic, says Brewer. Read a science chapter about the planets of the solar system while a song with a slow, calming tempo plays in the background. Urge your child to close her eyes and picture traveling in space, for example.
- **Fuse audio with visual.** Visual aids connected to data help your child recall information. If you assist her with homework, include a dry-erase board and music in the session. Explain a concept or work on a math problem, for instance, with classical music playing. Use the board to create charts and diagrams—anything your child can connect to the idea you are explaining. Brewer suggests using color and symbols when possible. Display these same images and songs again in your next tutoring session to reinforce the lesson.

- **Use bass to remember verbs.** Turn up the volume and let music stimulate your child. “I teach kids to hone into the bass line of a song,” says Pappalardo. He allows his students to feel the bass in their chest and arms. “It causes them to move, and when they move, a certain word appears in their minds. That word is a verb. Usually a good, strong verb,” he says. He and his students refer to these words as “buff verbs.” “The other day a student came in and said, “Ozzy Osbourne uses buff verbs. He used *spewing* and *gazed*,” says Pappalardo. “Rap music—even though it is hard to find clean enough songs to share with kids—houses verb after verb after verb,” he says. Encourage your child to use descriptive language to explain how the bass, the drums, and various elements of a song make her feel.
- **Tie tunes to tasks.** Your child memorizes more effectively through rhythm and rhyme. Chants and raps improve memory of details and help the retrieval of information later, says Brewer. Encourage her to take a favorite song and change the words to fit information she is learning. If she has a lesson on ecosystems, for example, change the tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” to “Mountains, Oceans, Forests, Plains.” She can sing this version before her test to retain facts.
- **Take a walkabout.** On a nature walk, have your child brainstorm ideas for a short story for English class. Then, head back inside, play a CD of nature or New Age sounds, and have her spend at least 15 minutes recalling and jotting down her ideas. Or, allow her to take a music player on a walk in the park. Urge her to absorb the lyrics of a few songs as she strolls through her natural surroundings. When she returns, she can replay these songs, which will jog her memory and inspire her to pen a poem.

Music can be used in different ways— not only to stimulate your child’s ears, but her mind. So turn it up!