

Shrink Rap: Kids Hitting High Notes

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We're sneaking up on fall, and you know what that means: time for parents and their kids to start thinking about the new school year. And when they do, parents should entertain the notion of balancing their children's school and extracurricular activities with a dose of music lessons.

Recent research published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* suggests that music lessons benefit children's IQ and academic performance, and the longer the instruction continues, the larger the effect. An initial study showed that six year olds given a year of voice or piano lessons saw a significantly larger increase in IQ than a control group that waited a year for musical instruction.

A follow-up study of children ages six to eleven supported this finding and further indicated that the longer the child takes lessons, the higher the IQ and the better the performance in school. Each additional month of music instruction was accompanied by an increase in IQ of one-sixth of a point. So six years of lessons was associated with an increase in IQ of 7.5 points, compared with children who did not have the same amount of musical instruction.

For a second group of college freshmen, who also were studied, six years of playing music regularly as a child predicted an increase of two points in IQ over their peers. While that may not sound like much, every IQ point may translate into higher grades and test scores.

The study found that taking music lessons in childhood was a significant predictor of a higher IQ in young adulthood and better high school grades. For the younger children, the study found a positive association between music lessons and higher academic grades and scores on achievement tests in mathematics, spelling and reading.

For the college freshmen, a history of playing music regularly as children and teenagers had small but significant associations with IQ, perceptual organization, working memory, and average high school grades. These associations remained significant after controlling for differences in family income, parents' educational levels and gender.

It isn't clear why music lessons have this positive effect on IQ and stronger academic performance. But the researchers believe it may be because children with higher IQs have more ability to handle the mental challenges of music lessons and school, and so lessons probably exaggerate that advantage. Also, the comprehension skills required in learning to read music may lead to improved intellectual functioning.

In addition to giving children a boost in IQ and school performance, getting kids started in music lessons has its own intrinsic rewards. Learning to play an instrument can lead to a life-time of appreciation, enjoyment and knowledge of various types of music. It also increases the chances of becoming proficient in playing one's chosen instrument. In addition, passively listening to and actively playing music serve as effective stress reducers and mood elevators.

The beauty of this research finding is its implication: it may not matter what instrument children choose, as long as they start young, persist with lessons and practice and learn to read music. So playing the electric guitar or drums may be just as helpful to IQ and grades as playing the violin or piano.

This research puts the teen and young adult behavior of attaching iPod earphones as a permanent extension of their ears in a more positive light – if it encourages taking lessons. And teens devoting their energy to treble will find less time for trouble.