Play on, music really can help a child’s development

Popular ideas, such as the “Mozart effect” – the idea that listening to classical music improves intelligence – has encouraged the belief that “music makes you smarter”.

This interest in the relationship between musical aptitude and ability and intelligence has been around for some time. But despite these beliefs being pretty widespread, there is still no conclusive evidence to prove that listening to certain types of music really can improve your intelligence.

In 1974, music researchers Desmond Sergeant and Gillian Thatcher said: “All highly intelligent people are not necessarily musical, but all highly musical people are apparently highly intelligent.”

And “apparently” is the key word here, because the evidence regarding musical listening in itself is mixed.

Research has shown that listening to music shows an improvement in certain kinds of mental tasks. But these are specifically short-term improvements involving “spatial-temporal reasoning” skills – puzzle-solving type tasks. But while listening to music is all well and good, what about actually playing it?

Some studies have shown musical training can shape brain development. And that improvements in small motor skills and general intelligence have been linked to musical training.

With these studies in mind, and drawing from my experience as a professional musician (drummer), music teacher and performing artist, I decided to investigate the effects of individual musical instrument learning on aspects of cognitive and behavioural development.

All the children who took part in the study had typical school group music lessons, but half of them had also chosen to learn an instrument individually for the first time that year. The results showed that children who had started individual music lessons developed a better awareness of their “aim” and “force” in relation to their own motor skills as well as improving their “fluid intelligence” – which is the ability to solve new problems, use logic in new situations, and identify patterns.

This suggests that musical instrument learning encourages the development of a physical sense of self in relation to the way we use objects in the world around us, as well as developing a specific kind of intelligence that is used in problem solving.

As part of my research, I also wanted to understand whether parents and teachers noticed changes over the year in terms of the children’s socio-emotional well-being. The results showed that the children who had chosen to learn an instrument were considered by both their parents and teachers to be less anxious than those who had received only group lessons.

These children were also thought to internalise their problems less compared to the children who had only received the group sessions.

It is clear then that music can have a big role to play when it comes to children’s learning.

Valuing music education includes nurturing the development of these abilities, and these skills and mindsets. Which is why developing a culture of creativity and musical learning in our schools should be a key part of children’s lives.

**THE CONVERSATION**

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Rebecca Armstrong is away
Children who learned instruments were thought to be less anxious by their parents and teachers.

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