



1 2 Let's All Play! Drumming & Movement for Pre K-Grade 2 & Special Needs

OMEA 2026 ~ Mary Knysh

maryknysh@gmail.com

www.rhythmicconnections.com

Session Slides



Creating a Brain-Based Activity Sequence ~ Recent neuroscience research highlights four key areas that boost neuroplasticity in both young children and special needs students: music, movement, creative play, and numinous experiences. In planning a session, use clear openings and closings, plus smooth transitions, to create a sense of familiarity and safety. For example, begin with a short welcome song or group movement that all learners can join easily. Over time, invite children, including those with special needs, to lead these rituals, fostering confidence, leadership, and inclusion. Once comfort is established, add novelty, new sounds, movements, or open-ended activities to keep the brain engaged and encourage exploration.

How Rhythm & Movement Enhance Learning ~ When young children and special needs students engage with rhythm and movement, they activate multiple brain regions at once, supporting attention, motor skills, language development, and social interaction. Steady beats and structured patterns help self-regulation, especially for learners who thrive on routine. For instance, incorporating rhythmic clapping, drumming, or simple dances provides predictable anchors that calm and ground the group. Linking movement to music also strengthens memory, improving retention of both academic content and social-emotional skills. This multisensory approach ensures all learners feel supported, engaged, and ready to absorb new information.

Objectives/Core Standards Addressed

- **Playing Instruments:** Basic drumming skills, instrument families (metal, woods, drums, shakers)
- **Beat/Rhythm Concepts:** Loud/Soft, Fast/Slow, Long/Short, High/Low, Repetition/Contrast, Beat competency
- **Movement:** Locomotor and Non-Locomotor; Circle and Line; Start and stop following a cue
- **Structured & Creative Movement:** Reinforce melody, rhythm, form, expression

LET'S BEGIN ~ Brain & Body Warm Up

Warming up both the brain and body helps learners transition into a focused and ready state. With predictable routines, students—especially those with special needs—gain comfort and familiarity. Use these warm-ups to build group cohesion, encourage participation, and reinforce basic vocal, physical, and rhythmic skills.

1. Breath to Boom

- Engage students in a gentle vocal warm-up by combining breath work with a simple vocal “boom.” Encourage them to lift their arms as they breath in, reaching their hands high over their heads. On the exhale students make a siren sound as hands move down and say a big BOOM when hands reach the floor.



Brain Benefit: Deep breathing reduces stress and enhances focus, priming the brain for higher-level tasks and receptive learning.

2. Babble to Freeze: PRONTO!

- In this playful leadership game that mimics the activity of the 100 billion neurons in the brain, students begin by saying “Prepare” with hands on laps.
- Next on the in breath, bring hands in front of the body and say “READY” (I love to use the Italian version, “PRONTO!”).
- This activity has three scaffolded steps 1: hands move fast in silence 2: hands move fast with vocal babbling sound to track the movement 3: hands move up and down quickly and vocal follows hands with babbling sounds moving high to low
- **Brain Benefit:** Synchronizing movement with auditory cues strengthens auditory processing and receptive language skills, both critical to early literacy development.

3. Heartbeat to Mid-Line Cross on Body Drum

- Encourage each student to pat a steady heartbeat on their body. Invite students to say and play “Legs X Legs X” as they tap then cross their hands on their legs.
- **Adaptation Tip:** For students with limited range of motion, adapt the tapping location for comfort—tapping just their lap or using an adapted drum on a table can work.
- **Brain Benefit:** Mid-line crossing builds coordination between the left and right hemispheres, supporting reading, writing, and other skills requiring bilateral integration.

4. Balloon Breath Stretch

- Guide the group through slow, mindful inhalations, imagining their lungs filling like balloons. On the exhale, have them stretch their arms out in front of their bodies, sliding their hands on the floor to provide an upper body stretch. This encourages body awareness, relaxation, and focus.
- This activity is a 3 part scaffolded sequence. The first two balloons are colors offered by students, the third balloon is always a rainbow balloon so students can sing/paint their favorite rainbow color on to the balloon.



Brain Benefit: Deliberate breathing and gentle stretching promote self-regulation and sensory integration, helping to calm and organize the nervous system.

GREETINGS ~ Community/Identity

Building a sense of community at the start of each session is key, especially for those needing a safe and inclusive environment.

Hello Hello Song

- **Body Percussion Exploration**
 - Demonstrate simple body percussion patterns (pat, clap, snap) and invite children to echo. This helps them become comfortable creating sounds using their body.
- **Call & Echo Body Percussion Patterns**
 - Begin with a pattern and invite the group to echo it back. Gradually increase complexity.
- **Create Patterns Built on Student Ideas**
 - Encourage children to offer their own rhythm or body percussion ideas, giving them a sense of ownership and leadership.



Brain Benefit: Group greetings and echo responses build social and emotional connections, fostering trust and cooperation among peers

BRAIN BOOST: CROSSING THE MIDLINE

Crossing the midline integrates both hemispheres of the brain, laying a foundation for more advanced skills like reading and writing. Each of the following exercises offers a playful way to engage the whole body while reinforcing beat and rhythmic structure.

3 Ways to Cross Midline & the “Dance” of Drum

This brain-body connection is formed by simultaneously moving, speaking, and playing patterns. Once children master the movements and sounds, invite them to sing “in their brains” (audiation) to further enhance internal listening skills.

FORWARD BACK

- **Walking Finger Exploration on Drum Head**
 - Invite children to wiggle their fingers on the drum head, moving them slowly from the center to the edge. This promotes fine motor development and drum familiarity.
- **Bass Tone Pattern Call & Echo**
 - Introduce a simple Bass (center of the drum) and Tone (edge of the drum) pattern. Have the group echo back. Say “Goon” for the Bass and “Pah” for the tone, these are African drum syllables.
- **Engage Students in Drum Dance**
 - Body rocks forward on Bass and back on Tone, coordinating body movement with the drum beats.
- **Patterns Built on Familiar Word Phrases**
 - *Food Grooves: PIZZA SONG* → | B B T T |
 - Tone = “PIZ ZA”
 - Bass = “pep/pep ro/ni”
 - Encourage students to come up with other favorite food ideas that they can play.



Brain Benefit: Associating rhythms with fun, meaningful words engages language centers in the brain, boosting recall and attention.

SIDE TO SIDE Drum Dance

- **Walking Hands Play B T T Pattern**
 - Introduce a simple three-beat pattern (Bass, Tone, Tone).
- **Body Drum Dance in Meter of 3**
 - Rock the body forward on Bass, then side-to-side on Tone.
- **Alternate Tone Between Right & Left**
 - This enhances both motor coordination and cross-lateral movement
- **Patterns Built on Familiar Word Phrases**
 - Use “Happy Birthday” or other short, well-known phrases.



Brain Benefit: Embedding motor actions in a familiar melody or phrase strengthens neural pathways related to language and movement integration.

UP and DOWN Drum Dance

- **Calypso Rhythm**
 - “*Ride the Donkey*” → | IN OUT IN OUT | is syncopated and lively. Encourage children to bounce in their seats as they play this rhythm.
- **Audiation Practice**
 - Once they learn the pattern, have them “sing it in their heads” while playing the drum, building active listening skills.
- **Add a Song**
 - Layer “Tingalay o” or other fun lyrics over the drum pattern to create a full musical experience.



Brain Benefit: Syncopated rhythms introduce complexity, which challenges cognitive flexibility and promotes adaptive thinking in both neurotypical and special needs students.

GETTING TO KNOW THE DRUM FAMILY

Introduce various drums (from highest pitch to lowest pitch) in a playful way. Encourage students to feel the vibration of each drum and compare how each size and shape produces a different sound. This fosters auditory discrimination and appreciation of musical variety.

Sheet music for a 4/4 time signature piece featuring four staves: Djembe Drum, Ashiko Drums, Tubadura Drums, and Floor Tom. The lyrics are: Djem be Djem be drum, Djem be Djem be drum; clap A shi ko, clap A shi ko; Tu ba dor a, Tu ba dor a; Low tom, High tom, Low tom, High tom.



Brain Benefit: Identifying and differentiating pitch and timbre sharpen auditory processing skills, vital for language and literacy.

LET'S GET MOVING!

Movement is essential for brain development. These activities invite students to contribute their ideas, making learning relevant and memorable.

1. Nothing Song

- A simple chant that leaves space for students to insert their own movements or words. This fosters creativity and spontaneity.

2. Sunny Day Zoo Song

- Sing about different animals, encouraging children to imitate their movements (e.g., elephant stomps, snake slithers).
- **Adaptation Tip:** For learners with limited mobility, offer alternate gestures or visual aids for each animal.

3. Mole in the Ground

- Invite students to make up new verses of this song that feature a variety of animal habitats and movements.



Brain Benefit: Large-motor movements paired with imaginative play build overall body coordination and spark creative problem-solving.

BOOMWHACKER FUN!

Boomwhackers provide an engaging, color-coded visual and tactile experience.

1. Using Caps on Boomwhackers

- Create two distinct sounds:
 - **BOOM** – Holding the tube upright and tapping the floor.
 - **TAP** – Holding the tube sideways and tapping the open edge on the floor.

2. Call & Echo Patterns

- The leader plays a short sequence of BOOM and TAP, and the group echoes it. This supports rhythmic recognition and short-term memory.

3. Song & Game Activities

- **Boomwhacker Echo Song:** Sing a simple melody and invite students to accent certain beats with their Boomwhackers.



Brain Benefit: Colorful, tactile instruments stimulate the visual cortex as well as motor areas, reinforcing multisensory learning and helping students with special needs stay engaged.

MOVEMENT AND LEADERSHIP GAMES

These activities link music and movement, fostering attention, focus, and leadership skills. Students learn to observe, respond, and take charge in a safe and supportive environment.

1. Conducting – Movement to Sound Conductor Game

- One student becomes the conductor, using a specific movement (e.g., arms swaying) to cue an instrument group to play.

2. Conducting – Sound to Movement

- Reverse the process: the conductor plays or sings a simple musical phrase, and the class responds with a corresponding movement.

3. Dance Conducting

- Assign each non-pitched instrument group to a body part (e.g., drums = feet, metal = hips). As the conductor moves that body part, the assigned group plays. This fosters quick reaction and creative expression.



Brain Benefit: Leadership games nurture executive function skills (like planning, inhibition, and flexible thinking), critical for academic success and independence.

MUSIC, MOVEMENT & STORYTELLING ~ COLLABORATIVE COMPOSITION

A Day in the Forest Experience: Integrate music, movement, and storytelling in a sequential “journey.” Students generate ideas, move in ways that reflect different parts of the story, and express feelings through sound.

Sequential Story in Sound & Movement (Inspired by Gabriele Roth’s 5 Rhythms)

- **FLOWING (Waking Up)**
 - Soft, fluid motions and quiet instrument sounds help depict early morning in a forest.
- **STACCATO (Morning Play)**
 - Sharp, defined movements represent animals scampering or children exploring. Experiment with short, punctuated rhythms.
- **CHAOS (Storm)**
 - Build intensity with louder, faster beats and swirling movements. Encourage safe yet energetic expression of the storm’s chaos.
- **LYRICAL (Rainbow)**
 - Move lightly and let the music become more melodic to depict the calm after the storm.
- **STILLNESS (Nightfall)**
 - Slow, quiet movements and soft sounds symbolize the forest settling down.

GROUPS then work together to compose a closing piece—an improvised combination of music, movement, and narrative.



Brain Benefit: Storytelling unifies auditory, visual, and kinesthetic processes in the brain, promoting comprehension, recall, and empathy. Special needs students often respond positively to narrative structures, finding comfort in predictability while still having the freedom to express themselves creatively.



Website/Resources



MK ~ You Tube

For more information, clinics, workshops and teacher trainings
www.rhythmicconnections.com maryknysh@gmail.com