

# Raising Engaged Listeners

(A concert etiquette guide for parents)

by Dr. Debra Lynn

When thinking about guiding your kids toward good concert behavior, remember to keep your intentions kid-focused, instead of adult-focused. Make it more about getting your kids to engage with the music, rather than trying to control their actions or prevent them from doing something wrong. They'll enjoy music more with genuine interest, and so will you!

## Every-Day Engagement

- Sing with, and to your kids. Even if you don't think you sing well – it's not about skill or creating great art. It's about interaction and family bonding.



- Bedtime is a great time for singing.
- My kids liked to sing in the bathtub because tile and porcelain are great acoustic surfaces.
- We declared “Opera Day” once in a while, meaning everyone had to sing everything they wanted to say for the day. That was tremendous fun! If you think a full day is too much, designate an Opera Hour every weekend.
- We often found ways to incorporate

singing into our story-reading time. We would make one character's voice a singing voice – or we would sing an entire book together.

- Ask your kids to teach you songs they are learning at school.
  - Some families sing a prayer at dinnertime.
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- Don't let music slip into the background of your life. Pull it into the fore-ground.
    - If you're riding in the car listening to music, participate in the music – sing along or make up hand motions (not the driver, though).
    - If you want to talk, play a game, or read aloud – turn the music off, so it doesn't compete with those activities.
    - If you're in the grocery store or a restaurant where music is playing in the background, talk to your kids about what they hear. Point things out to them that are interesting to you.



- “Arena-ism” is a word I use to describe the phenomenon of behavior that exists when we don’t realize the performers are affected by noise or distractions coming from the audience. This is because we forget that a live intimate/acoustic concert is different from a movie, sports event, or rock concert. Help your kids empathize with musicians. When you see someone playing or singing on television or YouTube, talk about what that performer might be experiencing:



- “I bet they have to really concentrate to play their instrument so well!”
- “Do you think those spotlights are hot? I think that might be why that performer is sweating a little.”
- “Wow, I would be nervous playing in front of so many people. It looks exciting, but a little scary too.”
- “Those people onstage are all listening closely to one another. Can you tell?”

- “I’ll bet they had to practice for hours to learn that music.”

Pre-Concert Activities – there’s a lot parents can do before the concert to help prepare their kids to engage with the music so the whole family can enjoy the experience together. Instrumental music is particularly difficult for people to connect with because popular music is typically sung. The story is told in words, so we don’t have to depend on our imagination to do any of the work. So, if you’re prepping your kids for an instrumental concert, design some activities that focus on music *without* lyrics.

- Play a short instrumental piece and ask your kids to make up or act out a story that the music might be telling. This will require multiple hearings of the same piece, so keep it short. Let them listen a couple of times to gather their thoughts before revealing their story. My kids enjoyed making up an interpretive dance to instrumental works, and they loved to include scarves, streamers, or small props.
- Make up lyrics to an instrumental piece. This helps kids search for and connect with particular themes and sing-able melody lines. The made-up lyrics don’t have to make sense or rhyme – just let it just be about fun and connecting with the music.
- Isolate particular rhythmic patterns and echo them back and forth. This can be done by clapping, stomping, marching, banging on pans, or anything you can use to make a sound.
- Practice concert situations. Watch a concert on television or YouTube and talk about what you are seeing and hearing. Talk about when it’s okay to applaud. Talk about intermission, entr’acte, etc.



- Do your homework! Contact the conductor or one of the performers to get some details about the concert ahead of time.



- Are there are parts of the concert that are more kid-friendly than other parts?
- How long will the concert be?
- What is the repertoire?
- Familiarize your kids with the pieces before the concert. They will anticipate those pieces and excitedly await hearing them at the concert.
- Talk to your kids about instruments

they will see and hear on the concert. Look those instruments up on YouTube and talk about how they are constructed or played. You don't have to be an expert – just talk about what you see and hear.

- If there's a guest soloist, look that person up on the internet with your kids. Read their bio – find out where they were born, or if they have kids, etc.

### Concert Day

- Don't try to have your kids sit through an entire concert at first. Work your way up to the 90-minute full-blown experience. Plan to leave at intermission, or only attend the second half. It's absolutely okay to leave during a concert, as long as you do so between pieces of music (during applause is a signal).
- Bring along some crackers and a drink in a sealable container, and step out into the lobby to let the kids have a snack break during the concert.
- Be sure your kids are rested and mentally ready for the concert. Don't attend concerts that disrupt their napping or eating schedules. Kids can't enjoy a concert when they are tired or hungry.
- Be sure you have plenty of time to get to the concert. If everyone is in a rush and stressed out about getting there on time, kids will associate art music with stress and frustration. Remember, it takes longer to take kids anywhere than it takes to get there yourself. When determining your departure time, consider drive time, traffic back-ups, parking time, box office time, and time to find your seats and get settled.
- Have kids use the restroom before the concert begins – or at least show them where the restrooms are before the concert. Children can become anxious when they are in a new place and don't know where the restrooms are.



Remember: **you don't have to be an expert in music** to help your kids learn to engage. You don't have to memorize a music dictionary to talk about music. You can use every-day words to describe what you hear and experience. Music can sound pink, or remind you of penguins, or feel like a train ride. **There are no wrong answers.** That is part of the beauty of music and what makes it fun and engaging for families.

**So grab up the littles, and have some fun!!!**

