English playwright William Congreve wrote that “music hath charms to soothe the savage beast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak.” If music can do all that, what effect might it have on the developing mind of a young child?

That question has been the subject of study by scientists as well as parents. While one has pored over the results of tests in labs, the other has looked for impacts in the soft glow of the nightlight next to a baby’s crib, where soft music carries a little one off to sleep.

The effect of music on children has been studied for its impact on mood and sleep as well as its more long-term impact on learning and achievement. The results on both fronts are impressive. Music, it seems, has charms that benefit children in myriad ways.

Parents use music throughout their days as it eases the strain of demands. Time in the car seat may be better tolerated by toddlers who can listen to entertaining tunes. Older children often focus on homework better with instrumental music playing in the background.

And as children of all ages get ready for sleep, soft music can transport them there. As German novelist Berthold Auerback wrote, “Music washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.” Lullabies cleanse the day away to bring us into a peaceful night.

Dr. Joel Robertson’s book “Natural Prozac” describes how the dopamine level in our brains can be affected by music. Loud, discordant music has one effect, and soothing, harmonious music has a very different one. The link between music and emotion is established, and the possibility of music’s link to memory is the subject of study.

So music has immediate benefits for children who bounce to lively tunes and nestle to quieter ones.

But more recent evidence shows that music has long-term benefits as well. Several studies point to some cognitive advantages for kids who have musical experiences.

The IQ’s of young students who had nine months of weekly training in piano rose nearly three points more than their untrained peers, according to a study from the University of Toronto.

An analysis of data on 25,000 secondary school students examined by the U.S. Department of Education revealed that students who report high levels of involvement in instrumental music show “significantly higher levels of mathematics proficiency by grade 12.” This effect holds out across social-economic status.

The College Entrance Examination Board published findings that students who had experienced either music performance or even music appreciation scored higher on the SAT. Students in music performance activities scored 57 points higher on the verbal tests and 41 points higher on the math than students who lacked arts participation. Students who had music appreciation experiences scored 63 points higher on verbal and 44 points higher on math.

Bidden or unbidden, music in its electronic forms is all around us. It finds its way into our very fabric as it makes connections in our brains and becomes part of who we are. It evokes memories and emotions, and impacts our mood.

If we can harness music’s power for our children’s benefit, we can help them write a symphony with their lives, and make each day sing along the way.

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