Why do kids like to go fast? By Lori Stephens

"Let's try that again. Do you think we should sing it a little slower or a little faster this time?"

Given the choice, kids always say faster. Have you ever noticed that? It doesn't matter if it is singing, dancing, playing an instrument or peekaboo! Faster, faster! A few weeks ago, my kindergarteners were listening to a slow, legato song and were supposed to be "ice skating" to the music. I watched a little boy speed skating past all the other kids. I made eye contact. He smirked. I asked, "Is your skating matching the speed of the music?" "No!", he laughed.

The old adage about someone who "beats to their own drum" recognizes that we all have an internal pulse inside of us. From hearing a mother's heartbeat in the womb, to feeling the back and forth motion of being rocked in a rocking chair, to their own arms swish-swish swishing to "The Wheels on the Bus", young children have an exposure to pulse from the beginning. Our job as music educators is to help our students feel and recognize that pulse and how it relates to the music around them. Sound daunting? It doesn't have to be!

We all use teacher modeling steady beat activities. I use songs with a faster tempo (around quarter note =120) to move to because that's the speed most kids naturally go! I turn on the recording. "Class, do what I do." Tap our lap, tap our shoulders, clap our hands, march in place. Sometimes I find myself wondering, "Is this a good use of our class time?" The answer is yes! Giving our little ones ample opportunity to successfully feel a steady beat will set the stage for success in later years - in music achievement and in everyday life. I read about some research carried out by High/Scope Educational Research Foundation (*Timing in Child Development, Kuhlman & Schweinhart, 1999*) that points to children who have a strong sense of steady beat also having high academic achievement in reading, speech, physical coordination and the ability to pay attention. An article in the Sept./Oct. 2003 edition of **Child Care Information Exchange** by Phyllis Weikart, "*Value for Learning and Living: Insights on the value of music and steady beat*", points out that although having a sense of pulse is innate in young children, we observe from our adult peers that this skill does need careful development and deliberate repetition or it will not remain an automatic response.

We might feel that this repetition is tedious, but "again, again" is what our young students crave and it is how they learn. To keep it fresh for yourself, use these activities as a time to listen to your new favorite song/genre. Choose a strong example from the class to come up and be the leader. Then you can sit next to a student who is less consistently successful. Gently tap the steady pulse on his shoulder or confirm for him when he is with the beat so he knows when he's being successful. Or turn on the recording and don't start moving first. Wait and see what your kiddos do. Copy them for something new.

Although I find the most success with kids keeping a steady beat if I let them "go fast", sometimes I want my students to slow down! I use a lot of creative movement activities with recordings of various tempi and styles. Several of my favorites are from John Feierabend's "First Steps in Music" curriculum. Blowing bubbles during "Moonlight Sonata" encourages slow, gentle motions. The extra incentive of having to sit down if they bump into someone (popping their bubble) helps slow them down. The kids' favorite is pretending to move through a room mysteriously filled with jello. I demonstrate the kind of strong, "slow motion" movements required while playing heavy, legato music (movie soundtracks work well) and ask if the class would like to try it. Of course they would! But don't expect this activity to last very long the first time they try it. A four or five year old's idea of moving in slow motion still moves faster than my best day after a cup of coffee!

Of course, not every student moves at march tempo. Let them show you their internal pulse by inviting a child to play a duet with you. Ask him/her to play a drum or other instrument while you sing a song. Let them start alone as the introduction and once they've established the tempo of their choice, join in by singing a simple song to their tempo. If they stop, you stop. If they slow down, you slow down. Once they figure out that they are in charge, it will be their favorite game! Meanwhile, they are guaranteed to have a successful experience in a steady beat activity, no matter what tempo they choose. Sometimes a child moves "as fast as they can", making it difficult to sing along. I've found if I sing at half their tempo, they still get to go fast, but the experience is still meaningful because they are feeling the subdivision of the song instead of me trying to keep up with them and failing. This experimentation makes sense in their initial exposure to the activity, but then we need to encourage them to move beyond that desire to just go fast. Here are some ideas to encourage a variety of responses from your students:

Ask them to repeat the activity, but pretend they are a turtle or a toy running out of batteries.

Ask them to move like a snake, a butterfly and a cheetah.

Tell them you are sorry their turn was over so fast. Do they want to try it again slower so we can see/hear them better?

Use tempo cards with words (slow, medium, fast) or pictures (bicycle, car, plane). A volunteer chooses a tempo card, they demonstrate the speed by singing or moving while you sing to their beat. Have classmates guess what card the volunteer chose.

Once we accept that all kids have an innate tempo that needs nurtured, we just have to design activities around letting them express it meaningfully. The truth is, I like that they want to go fast. I could say it's because I want them to be masters of subdivision or to be able to play amazing runs on the clarinet someday, but mostly it's because I like to go fast, too! We can get lots done in a short amount of time, and... it's fun!