

Musician Kay Tucker tells Nione Meakin how she teaches children to play music in her Stringbabies programme

Children as young as three are being taught to read and play music with a technique developed by a Sussex musician.

Cellist and music teacher Kay Tucker created the Stringbabies programme as a means of introducing youngsters to disciplines best learned at an early age.

With the help of Alice, Dan, George and Charlie – four teddy bears whose initials represent a musical note – she teaches children to associate the teddies with sounds made by certain strings, then with shapes and finally with notes on a staff.

Schools and nurseries were initially resistant to her ideas, arguing that music couldn't be taught to such young children, but after a successful trial with a class in Pulborough, she has gone on to publish a series of Stringbabies books which are being adopted by teachers up and down the country.

Earlier this year, the 50-year-old from Horsham was nominated for Best Music Initiative in The Rhinegold Music Teacher Awards for Excellence.

"Conventional music gives an awful lot of information – probably too much – all at once," says Kay.

"When you have information dancing all over the place on a staff it's a lot to take in. I've stripped what's involved in reading music back to its bare bones to introduce the different elements one at a time."

She didn't begin playing until she was 12 and believes it would have helped her to have started much earlier.

"At three or four, children are very physically flexible and



String theory

being successful as a violinist or cellist depends very much on having good physical habits. It's also an age when your mind is very open to learning new things. Although I was constantly being told children couldn't learn to play music at this age, I've proved that they can."

The struggles Kay went through in becoming a musician have been invaluable in developing the programme, she says.

"These things are often born out of trying to find a solution to your own difficulties. I've never lost touch with my childhood and can clearly remember how I felt when I first started learning to play the cello.

"Creating Stringbabies has also made me appreciate the complex tasks playing music requires – tasks we often take for granted in older children. Just a simple thing like asking a three-year-old to use their left hand to hold down strings and to then bring their other hand over to pluck them is a huge job for the brain."

Both of Kay's children have special needs and this has also

fed into the programme.

"Neither of my children could count sequentially, for example, which makes something as simple as holding a note quite challenging. But I've always been a believer in tackling things head on and finding ways to bring down

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barriers so I wanted to work around issues like that."

The programme has also proved useful in flagging up early learning difficulties long before they would usually be spotted.

After two of her books were republished, with CD accompaniments by Kay and

her husband Paul, music services in Surrey, Cornwall and London have picked up on them and have begun training teachers in the techniques.

James Thomas, Head of Music Services at Hackney Learning Trust, says he was surprised by how well young children responded to Kay's methods. "Her approach is really enlightening particularly for children with learning difficulties or those who just cannot understand music on a staff."

Kay is now working with other musicians to adopt the techniques for use with double bass, piano, recorder and flute. She would love to see Stringbabies methods being taught more widely.

"The younger you start playing music, the more natural it feels, but people often struggle to learn and are put off. I hope my methods encourage children and show them how simple and pleasurable music can be when you strip it right back to the basics."

● For more on Kay Tucker and Stringbabies, visit www.stringbabies.com