

Rhythm is Social Glue

Tom Foote, Music Educator, Percussionist & Composer

Within these four words lies a wealth of insight into the intricate tapestry of human society and the fundamental role that rhythm plays in binding us together, resonating deeply with the essence of human connection. I believe rhythm is the unseen thread binding societies together. From ancient tribal gatherings to modern-day metropolises, rhythm has been a constant companion in the human journey. It manifests in various forms—the steady beat of drums echoing through the savannah, the synchronized movements of a dance troupe, or the rhythmic pulse of a bustling city street. Regardless of its expression, rhythm serves as a universal language, transcending cultural barriers and uniting individuals in shared experiences.



What Rhythm Can Do

Recently, I had a few people over for dinner, and a drum circle spontaneously broke out in our studio. After ten minutes of playing together, we were all smiles, peaceful, and in a different state of mind. Later, as we sat around a fire, we all commented on how great and connected we felt after just a few minutes of drumming. The change was noticeable.



At its core, rhythm embodies a sense of harmony and synchrony. It is the invisible force that aligns hearts and minds, forging bonds of solidarity among diverse communities. In the midst of chaos and discord, rhythm can offer a semblance and coherence, providing a common rhythm for people to march to, both of order metaphorically and literally. Consider the role of rhythm in music—a cultural phenomenon that transcends geographical boundaries and speaks to the depths of the human soul. Whether it be the pulsating rhythms of African music, the intricate patterns of Indian classical music, or the driving force of rock and roll, music has an unparalleled ability to unite people across divides. In a world fraught with division and strife, the shared experience of music serves as a potent reminder of our common humanity.

Moreover, rhythm permeates every aspect of human interaction, from the cadence of our speech to the patterns of our daily routines. In the workplace, it fosters collaboration and teamwork, synchronizing individuals towards a common goal. In social settings, it facilitates communication and camaraderie, enabling us to connect with one another on a deeper level. Even in moments of solitude, rhythm provides solace and comfort, offering a sense of continuity amidst the ebb and flow of life.

The Pure Power of Rhythm

A few years ago, I was invited to be an artist-in-residence at a public school in Needham, Massachusetts. Along with a master drummer from Mali and a few colleagues, we taught children from Kindergarten to fifth grade about rhythm from around the world in large assemblies and small groups. I also worked with the school principal, who had asked me to teach her several introductory rhythms she could use in her work. When I asked how she planned on using these rhythms, my heart was full of joy. Her plan was to have two or three drums in her office for children sent to her for disciplinary reasons. Before discussing a student's behavior or interaction, she wanted to spend some time drumming together to build a non-verbal connection and synergy. She saw the impact drumming had on the school and wanted to foster this connection on an interpersonal level. When I followed up a few months later, she said she saw fewer instances of discipline and quicker resolve, along with an openness and sense of calm after drumming together. Where was this principal when we were in school, right?!



One of my most treasured drumming experiences was working with a group of bereaved parents and those who had suffered loss, sponsored by the In Harmony Foundation in the Bay Area, entitled "Drumming Through Grief." I led an in-person and an online group through a series of exercises connecting drumming with breathing, staying present, releasing and expressing, and working together in rhythm. After each exercise, I would share a powerful thought (based on scientific research) about what we might experience and how it could benefit us. Typically after a drum circle I am energized, but after this first drum circle I felt a different energy, one of deep empathy. I sat on my sofa meditating, letting tears flow, untying knots in my own heart. Turns out the work we had done together worked on me.

Rhythm is my work. It is my daily life. My teachers are the children and families I see in my music classes each week at In Harmony Music. I see families walk hand in hand into the studios or outdoor spaces where we meet. We sit in a circle to sing, dance, and play together. Every week is a new experience, a new cycle of rhythm, and it is always, and I mean always, the most beautiful thing to witness. Indeed, the power of rhythm lies not only in its ability to bring people together but also in its capacity to shape our collective identity. Through shared rituals and traditions, we reinforce the rhythm of our communities, passing down stories and customs from generation to generation. In doing so, we affirm our belonging to something greater than ourselves—a timeless rhythm that echoes throughout history.



As we navigate the complexities of the modern world, it is essential to recognize the profound significance of rhythm in shaping our social fabric. In a society increasingly fragmented by division and discord, let these four simple words—"rhythm is social glue"—bind us together. For in the rhythm of our shared humanity, we find strength, resilience, and hope.

Making Rhythm Your Social Glue

Here are a few suggestion to make rhythm a part of your world.

- 1 Create a Rhythm-Based Routine:** Establishing a consistent daily routine with a rhythmic structure can provide a sense of security and predictability for children. This can include regular times for meals, homework, play, naps and bedtime. **Benefit:** Consistent routines help children understand expectations and support time management skills.
- 2 Incorporate Music and Movement:** Integrate rhythmic activities such as dancing, clapping games, and drumming into your daily interactions. These activities not only provide physical exercise but also improve coordination and emotional expression. **Benefit:** A simple family dance party or a drumming session with household items can lift moods and enhance family bonding.
- 3 Use Rhythm for Behavioral Management:** Similar to the school principal's approach mentioned, using rhythm-based activities can help manage behavior. When a child is upset or needs to calm down, engaging in a rhythmic activity like drumming or rhythmic breathing can help them regulate their emotions. **Benefit:** This non-verbal connection can be soothing and build trust between you and your child.
- 4 Foster Social Connections Through Group Activities:** Engage in group activities that involve rhythm, such as family music classes, community drum circles, or playing rhythm-based games to encourage teamwork, enhance social skills, and create a sense of community. **Benefit:** Participating in such group activities can help children develop a sense of belonging and improve their social interactions.



About In Harmony Music

In Harmony Music is a forward-thinking early childhood music education company designed for the needs of today's families. We believe music is essential for children, families, schools and communities who need real-life support for development beginning from infancy. We recognize that music, movement, play, and meaningful group experiences build neuroplasticity in the brain, and serve as foundational elements for the overall well-being of children and adults. Our classes are a canvas for communal creative expression, creating an environment to explore and embrace the transformative power of music!

About the Author



Tom Foote is a professional musician/drummer who studied at Berklee College of Music, Drummer's Collective and Shepherd University. He is versed in all musical styles; classical percussion, world percussion, African drumming and drum set. Tom has toured the world and composed, recorded, and was a trainer for the music education company Music Together, and created and developed the Rhythm Kids program, which is being taught around the world. Tom studied with Malian master drummer Moussa Traore and is endorsed by Toca Percussion. He teaches with In Harmony Music in the Bay Area, and leads workshops for children and schools around the country. He has recorded, produced, arranged and composed several albums and singles with songs families and schools can stream and enjoy. The phrase "rhythm is social glue" was quoted in Dr. Steven Nowicki's book entitled "Raising Socially Successful Children" released by LittleBrown Spark Publishing.

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