

Unlocking Potential: Fun Brain-Based Music Strategies for Classroom Management

By Mary Knysh, Founder of Rhythmic Connections

Is classroom management an issue for you and your school community?

If the answer is yes, you are not alone. Worldwide, educators are searching for innovative and engaging solutions to this growing challenge. What if we approached classroom management with a new mindset—using music as the pathway toward creating an optimal learning environment? Students could be educated in the way neuroscientists tell us they learn best.

Science continues to shape our understanding of the connection between music and neuroscience, particularly the effects that rhythm and music have on brain neuroplasticity. Four key components for rewiring the brain are:

- **Making music**
- **Movement**
- **Creative play**
- **Numinous experience** (when many create as one)

Brain-based music strategies and rhythmic activities are ideally suited for addressing classroom management in fun, accessible, and engaging ways.

A key factor for brain-based optimal learning is a safe, supportive, and empowering environment—one where students experience a sense of belonging, identity, value, purpose, and joy. In this environment, students and teachers collaborate to co-create a classroom culture where all are held accountable and invested in success.

Through decades of work with educators worldwide, I've collected a consistent list of classroom management challenges. These include:

- Focus
- Engagement
- Listening skills
- Daily transitions
- Student apathy
- Accountability
- Student buy-in
- Collaboration
- Creativity
- Student leadership

In response, I've worked with educators and facilitators to co-create rhythmic and music-based strategies designed to meet these challenges in fun and meaningful ways. These activities can be

adapted for use in any classroom—with or without instruments—using body percussion, small percussion, drums, Boomwhackers, or melodic instruments.

FOCUS

Breath to Boom

This is a terrific activity to warm up the voice, calm the body, and quickly focus students of all ages. It works especially well as a transition activity and can be used throughout the day to either re-energize or relax the group. This rhythmic breathing technique integrates vocalization, gesture, and collective timing.

Process:

- Take a deep, relaxed breath in as you raise your hands high in the air.
- On the out breath, slide your voice from high to low following your hands as they slowly descend.
- When your hands reach your lap, say, “Boom!”
- Repeat 3 times or until the group completes the movement and sound in unison.
- Gradually shift "Boom!" from a loud sound to a very soft one.
- Hold out the “m” sound of “Boom” while playing a slow, steady beat together.

This activity gently regulates the nervous system and transitions the class toward focused attention with calm energy.

Rumble/Firecracker Game

This activity is a fun and engaging strategy for stress release and redirecting attention. It can be done with body percussion (rumbling quietly on legs) or with desks and classroom instruments. When students are called upon for a “big noise,” they can respond with a short vocal burst or loud rhythmic accent.

Process:

- Everyone rumbles freely on their body, desks, or instruments, keeping shoulders loose and relaxed.
- The leader gradually brings the volume down and invites the group to rumble as quietly as possible.
- Leader signals the class to play ONE LOUD SOUND — this is the “Firecracker!”

Variations include:

- **Individuals:** The leader signals one student at a time to play a loud sound, while others continue rumbling.
- **Rumble Wave:** The leader sweeps their hand around the room to initiate a ripple of loud firecracker sounds.
- **Firecracker Call and Response:** A student creates a short rhythm when signaled; the group echoes it and returns to rumbling.

- **New Leader Cue:** The leader rolls their hands in front of their body and cues a student to take over facilitation.

(Thanks to Lucas Coffey drum circle facilitator from Edmonton, Alberta, CN, for the original inspiration.)

CONNECT

Heartbeat Pulse (Pre-K to Grade 2)

This short, engaging activity helps students calm their bodies and minds while developing group listening, steady beat, and cross-lateral integration.

Process:

- Ask students to place both hands on their chests and "listen" to the drum inside their bodies.
- Tap hands over the heart and say, "Heart Beat, Heart Beat" — alternating hands.
- Move the rhythm to the legs using both hands: "Legs Legs Legs Legs."
- Freeze and introduce a new pattern: cross hands and tap legs, asking students what letter this shape forms (X).
- Say, "Legs X Legs X," emphasizing the movement across the midline.

This activity reveals much about developmental readiness and is also a fantastic curriculum connector.

 Welcome Warm Ups/Heartbeat Video: <https://bit.ly/WarmUpsHeartbeat>

Heartbeat Pulse (Grades 3 to Adult)

Process:

- Invite participants to find their pulse by touching their neck below the jawbone.
- Reach forward and tap the air in front of the body in time with the pulse.
- Tap the air with both hands, then move the pulse to the legs and create sound.
- The group will begin to synchronize naturally, demonstrating the phenomenon of entrainment.
- Invite the group to step the pulse together, reinforcing rhythmic unity.
- Once established, transition into call and echo vocal or body percussion.

This sequence helps learners experience their internal rhythm and align with others through shared movement.

Hello Hello Song

This multicultural greeting song creates an opening ritual that celebrates community identity and builds leadership. Once students learn the song, they are invited to adapt it to reflect their own culture and language.

- Use as an opening ritual paired with the Heartbeat activity.
- Each class can co-create their own Hello Hello Song based on their cultural background.
- Empower students to lead the ritual over time, stepping into leadership roles.

Resources:

- Audio: [Hello Hello.m4a](#)
- Lesson Plan: [Hello Hello Lesson Plan PDF](#)
- Video: [Hello Hello Song Video](#)

Musical Home

This rhythmic composition is created and co-owned by the class. It functions as a "musical family portrait" where everyone is represented and contributes. Musical Home can be returned to again and again as a centering ritual.

Process:

1. **Exploration 1:** Stay connected to the group pulse and explore different body or instrument sounds.
Simplify: Choose two favorite sounds to form a rhythm.
2. **Exploration 2:** Explore again while listening to and imitating inspiring sounds from others.
Simplify: Create a new pattern with two new sounds.
3. **Exploration 3:** Explore freely and listen for one shared group rhythm to emerge.
Simplify: Work together until everyone is playing the exact same rhythm — your class's unique Musical Home.

Document: Record the pattern as your community rhythm to use throughout the year.

REDIRECT

Student-Led Music Circle Facilitation

When students take on leadership roles, they develop ownership and accountability. In a music circle, student facilitators guide the group using percussion and melodic instruments. The focus is on relationships and connection rather than performance.

Basic Drum Circle Facilitator Cues (*adapted from Arthur Hull*):

- **Attention Call:** Raise hand, make eye contact, rotate in center.
- **Stop Cut:** Count in and signal a stop using arms crossed and open outward.
- **Call to Groove:** Cue re-entry: "One, two, everybody play... NOW!"
- **Continue to Play:** Roll hands to keep part of the group playing.
- **Rumble:** Wiggle hands for fast playing; bring in members one by one.
- **Volume Control:** Use hand gestures to raise or lower volume.
- **Sculpting:** Cue one half of the circle to play, then stop or highlight them.
- **Call and Echo:** Leader creates rhythmic calls; group echoes back.

Use short student-led music circles to open each class. Rotate leaders to build skills and create a thriving musical culture of inclusion and collaboration.

Coming Soon!

Look for Mary's new book, "**Drum Circles 101**", coming soon from Alfred Music Publishing! Check out Mary's current books and resources:

 [Rhythm Band MK Products Page](#)

Additional Resources:

- [Rhythmic Connections](#)
- [Music for Wellness](#)
- [Music for People Organization](#)
- [Mary's YouTube Channel](#)
- [Rhythm Band Instruments](#)

About the Author

Mary Knysh is an international teacher/trainer, conference presenter, Orff Schulwerk clinician, Young Audiences teaching artist, and author. She is endorsed by Rhythm Band Instruments, TOCA Percussion, and Peripole Music. Mary is the founder of Rhythmic Connections and Program Director for Music for People.