

- Music

More music lessons – to improve memory, intelligence and behaviour

As the government launches the National Year of Music, a new report confirms that learning an instrument has many benefits for children

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Primary school pupils learning the double bass. Photograph: Chris Thomond

Learning a musical instrument at school improves children's behaviour, memory and intelligence, a government-commissioned study has found, as ministers launch the first National Year of Music.

Professor Susan Hallam, of the Institute of Education, University of London, analysed scores of researchers' studies on the benefits of music to children.

She found researchers had discovered that learning to play an instrument enlarges the left side of the brain. This leads musically-trained pupils to remember almost a fifth more information.

Hallam's research review was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families as part of a drive to persuade more children in England to play a musical instrument.

The government hopes to double the number of children, aged seven to 11, who are given a chance to learn an instrument for free by 2011. The government says that now over half of primary-aged children - 1m - learn an instrument.

A study contrasting the impact of music lessons with that of drama classes found music lessons, over time, increased pupils' IQ by seven points, compared to 4.3 points for drama lessons.

Several US studies have found that playing an instrument improves children's behaviour. This was because working in small musical groups requires trust, respect and compromise, Hallam said.

"In adolescence, music makes a major contribution to the development of self-identity and is seen as a source of support when young people are feeling troubled or lonely," Hallam said.

But singing or piano lessons do not necessarily improve children's maths ability. "The relationship between maths and active musical engagement has had mixed results," Hallam said.

Ministers say they have invested £330m in music "inside and outside the classroom" in the last year.

It comes as the government launches the first National Year of Music.

This will see long-haired rock guitarist, Slash, partnered with the neatly-combed education secretary, Ed Balls, to take part in what the government has called the biggest music lesson ever.

Some of the country's best-known artists, including jazz-pop singer Jamie Cullum and funk singer VV Brown, will play from the classrooms of a comprehensive in Acton, west London today. Others, such as Slash, will be recorded playing from afar for the occasion.

Thousands of schools across the country will link up to hear and see them.

Balls said: "Music is at the very heart of British popular culture – it's what kids talk about, it's what they aspire to. It's fantastic that TV talent shows like X Factor attract millions of viewers each week, but young people need to know that they can only become stars by mastering the basics when they're young and by learning about a range of music, from classical to country. This is exactly why we need world-class music education in schools. We know that learning to play an instrument can improve both reading and writing. It is right that music should play an important role in school life and beyond."