



Published on *International Bluegrass Music Association* (<https://ibma.org>)

[Home](#) > Backfilling the Bluegrass Audience: How to foster an interest in bluegrass music in young people (Part 2)

---

## [Backfilling the Bluegrass Audience: How to foster an interest in bluegrass music in young people \(Part 2\)](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

*Continued from "Backfilling the Bluegrass Audience (Part 1)," by Roger Siminoff*

Nancy Cardwell points out that in addition to Special Consensus a number of professional touring and local bands present interactive, educational, and fun programs on bluegrass music for students. The annual Talent Directory issue of *Bluegrass Unlimited* magazine ([www.bluegrassmusic.com](http://www.bluegrassmusic.com) <sup>[2]</sup>) includes an asterisk by each band name that offers school programs. The Bluegrass Foundation and IBMA websites include a list of resource bands, which they continually update, in their online *Implementation Manual for Bluegrass in the Schools*. The Foundation also offers \$200 matching fund mini-grants to help pay for live, educational presentations of bluegrass music at schools. Bands like Grassology of San Diego; Valerie Smith & Liberty Pike based in Nashville; Brooklyn, New York's Astrograss (who also incorporate songwriting); the Bearfoot band from Alaska; the Ryan Holladay Band; Sierra Hull & Rt. 111; New Mexico's Foxfire Bluegrass; the Keisler Brothers in Arkansas; Ronnie McCoury's *Little Mo McCoury* CD and live presentation package; and several talented family bands like the Doerfels, The Muellers, The Bankester Family, Dewgrass, Gold Heart, and more are stellar examples.

### **Programs for young people already interested in bluegrass:**

Once children have been exposed to bluegrass and enjoy it, the key is to keep that interest alive. For children who have developed an interest and have started to play an instrument, the California Bluegrass Association (CBA) offers two programs. One is called Kids on Bluegrass (KOB), which exposes young people to all aspects necessary for performing bluegrass music on a professional stage. The second program is the Darrell Johnston Kids Instrument Lending Library that loans instruments to children between the ages of 3 and 18.

Kids on Bluegrass is a performance-based program under the direction of Frank Solivan, Sr. (yes, the father of mandolin player Frank Solivan II.) who has been gracing the main stage at the California Bluegrass Association's (CBA) Father's Day Bluegrass Festival (Grass Valley, California) for the past 18 years. The program started small with just a few very talented kids who wanted to be able to have the chance to perform on the same stage as the professional bands. "They wanted the chance to be able to play to a real audience," Sharon Elliott, Frank's assistant, said. "They had the bug and knew at a very young age that they wanted to be on stage. What started with just a few kids 18 years ago has now become an extremely popular program that hosts anywhere from 20 to 50 kids."

Each year at CBA's festivals, kids between the ages of 3 and 18 who can sing and/or play an instrument without the help of a parent or guardian gather at the campsite of Frank Solivan in

the hopes of being part of Kids on Bluegrass. In this program, the kids are not taught how to play, but they are taught how to perform. With the help of a team of counselors, Frank artfully works with kids of many different skill levels. Songs are chosen that can be played showcasing as many individuals as possible while also finding other kids that can play backup. Many different skills are worked on such as listening to each other, timing, connecting with the audience, moving on and off stage, using the mic, etc. Rehearsals take place on Thursday and Friday with the first performance on Friday afternoon, and then rehearsals resume on Saturday morning with another performance on Saturday evening.

What started out as a very small group of young performers has grown into an incredibly popular professional show not only for the kids but also for the audience. Kids on Bluegrass now consistently fills, almost to capacity, with an adoring audience that truly shows the kids how important they are to the association's members, to bluegrass music and its future.

Sharon reported, "Over the past 18 years we have had many children grow up to become well-known professional bluegrass musicians that are currently performing all across the country. It is our belief that providing them with a place to learn all the necessary skills needed for performing on stage while they were young helped them as they began their professional lives. Kids on Bluegrass is a program that children return to year after year, not only for the learning experiences and the friendships they make, but for the love of entertaining."

For the past several years, Kim Fox of 3 Fox Drive has been creating a "Kids on Bluegrass" show at the Fan Fest portion of IBMA's World of Bluegrass week with some of the top bluegrass kids in the country. The California Bluegrass Association has been fortunate to have many of its own Kids on Bluegrass be participants in this show.

The Darrell Johnston Kids Instrument Lending Library was the brainchild of Darrell Johnston who thought that there was a need to provide instruments to children who might not be able to afford one or to families with multiple children who might not be able to afford multiple instruments. Sadly, Darrell died suddenly without seeing his dream come true. To keep Darrell's dream alive, Sharon and Steve Elliott developed the program, and today it is a very popular component of the CBA. Currently, the Lending Library has many instruments loaned out to families, and one of the requirements is that the children must learn and become involved with bluegrass music.

"In this program," Sharon says, "we take in donated good playable bluegrass instruments. We have luthiers who donate their time to fix and repair instruments that need it. We then loan the instruments to children between the ages of 3 to 18. The child may use the instrument until they are 18, and at that time the instrument must be returned to the lending library to be loaned to another child. One of the wonderful things about this program is that as the child grows, they may exchange the instrument—such as a fiddle or guitar—and get the next larger size. In addition, the child may try different instruments without purchasing them."

"We have been very blessed with this program as there have been many wonderful people that have donated instruments. Companies such as the Martin Guitar Company, The Fifth String in Berkeley, California, and Harwood Mandolins of California have donated instruments to us. Also, Mandolin Café ran a benefit for us, which resulted in us receiving some very nice, good quality instruments. Bill Bussman of Old Wave Instruments even built us a half-size mandolin. What we need are good quality instruments, not just throwaways, because these

kids are very serious about their music and become excellent musicians.?

Expanding on the idea of providing instruments, Nancy Cardwell shared that Deering Banjos offers five Goodtime Banjos for the price of four to any teacher organizing a new bluegrass program at school ([www.deeringbanjos.com](http://www.deeringbanjos.com) [3]), Goldtone Banjos has created the Bluegrass Apprentice Program with youth-sized instrument packages and curriculum at [www.iplaybluegrass.com](http://www.iplaybluegrass.com) [4], and foundation-based resources for funding are posted in the online *Bluegrass in the Schools Implementation Manual* as they are discovered.

Nancy points out that the Bluegrass Academy for Kids, similar to the Kids on Bluegrass program initiated by CBA, was organized at the Grey Fox Bluegrass Festival in New York several years ago, with strong offshoot programs now at the Joe Val Bluegrass Festival in Framingham, Massachusetts, the Gettysburg Bluegrass Festival in Pennsylvania, and Wintergrass in Washington State. A week-long Bluegrass Camp for Kids is offered at the Festival of the Bluegrass in Lexington, Kentucky, and the Bluegrass Boot Camp takes place in Bean Blossom, Indiana. Many festivals offer a number of additional youth-focused programs including special youth stages where they can be entertained or perform themselves; ?Bluegrass Instrument Petting Zoos? where children can pick up instruments and strum them ? perhaps learning a few chords; and ?Teen Tents? where only the under-20 crowd can gather to jam, enjoy soft drinks and snacks, and hang out with professional musicians scheduled to visit the tent throughout the weekend ? perhaps taking a lesson, asking questions or just playing some music together.

The annual Youth Bluegrass Band Contest takes place in Branson, Missouri at the Silver Dollar City theme park in May, co-hosted by KSMU-FM in nearby Springfield, Missouri. The International Bluegrass Music Museum, based in Owensboro, Kentucky, hosts a ?Bluegrass All-Stars? program that includes Saturday lessons at the museum for children and parents, along with monthly visits from multi-instrumentalist/instructor Randy Lanham, who arrives with a couple dozen bluegrass instruments at each city, county and private school in the region.

The Foundation for Bluegrass Music also offers a festival-based ?Utilizing Bluegrass Music in the Classroom? workshop for teachers to earn professional development credit and sometimes college CEU?s in an increasing number of states, as well as workshops for bands to help them develop, book and fund bluegrass programs in schools.

### **The value beyond the music:**

Many young people benefit from bluegrass programs in other ways beyond just the musical influence. There is also a great reward for the program developers and leaders. As Sharon notes, ?Working with the Kids on Bluegrass program has been an amazing and wonderful experience for me as well as for the kids. Probably one of the highlights of my year! Regarding really getting kids hooked, I have seen kids who are extraordinarily shy come to the KOB, and they are so shy they can barely speak. Then, after one weekend working with others, they begin to come out of their shells. I have watched some of our long-timer kids reach out to these shy kids and show them a lick or teach them something that helps the new kid, and I have watched these new kids become the old and confident kids who a few years later become the teacher and then the leader. One young girl was shy when she joined us and not only became a leader and very good performer with the KOB, but she also started a bluegrass band at her school.?

Nancy points out that Kim Samuel's Gallatin County Youth Bluegrass Band (now in their teens) runs the entire Bluegrass Camps for Kids at the Festival of the Bluegrass in Lexington, Kentucky every summer for a week in June, acting as counselors and music teachers for younger children, which has given the group valuable leadership experience.

Having something positive to focus on can reinforce and stimulate learning in other areas. Nancy noted that a student named Joey Meadows at Duval County High School in West Virginia, who was failing several classes and planning to drop out of school when he turned 16, joined the after school bluegrass club sponsored by math teacher Peggy Duval and her husband, a local musician. Joey learned to play the bass, then picked up the banjo and never looked back. He became a confident lead singer and musician, taught younger students in the club to play, and his increased self-esteem caused him to get serious about staying in school and raising his grades. He graduated with honors and is now enrolled in a community college.

Another benefit of such programs is the improved interaction with other children. Sharon added, "There was another young, classically-trained violinist who was an only child. She had grown up in violin contests and was a California champion in her age group. Because she had only ever performed alone in these contests, she never learned how to communicate in large social settings like the KOB and never knew what it was to share the spotlight. She also did not know how to give and take. When she started with the KOB it was real hard for her, but by the third year this young girl of nine was teaching both the younger and the older kids and was reaching out to help keep the younger ones in time. In fact, one day she felt confident enough to sing."

Ken Roddick noted, "The majority of the students attempted singing in front of others for the first time. Some had the opportunity to perform on stage. So, I would say it was a confidence builder for most students. Many developed life-long skills in playing a musical instrument for enjoyment. Also, they gained confidence in trying new things that they may have never thought of attempting. I am sure there is more value than we can realize at the outset."

### **Fueling their interest:**

Young people influence young people. As Sharon puts it, "Nothing catches kids quicker than other kids, their peers! It is my firm belief that if you want to hook them, you need kids to hook them."

Expanding on the idea previously mentioned about bringing bluegrass bands to schools, Sharon feels that the ideal way to spark their interest is to bring bluegrass bands comprised of kids to the schools. "I spoke about this in a workshop at the IBMA Business Conference," Sharon said, "and everyone thought that you had to take really good adult bluegrass band into the schools to introduce bluegrass music. I said, "You also need to take kids bands. Kids relate to kids!"

To validate her point, Sharon stated that two bands, Mountain Laurel (adults) and the Anderson Family (an adult band with four kids), made arrangements to go into a school that the Anderson Family is associated with. "During the performance, she said, "Mountain Laurel went on first. They were received warmly, and there was no doubt that the young attendees were interested. However, when the Anderson Family with 12-year-old Paige, 10-year-old Amy, 7-year-old Ethan and 5 year old Daisy came out on stage with their mom and dad and

started playing, the entire house came down. It was the kids seeing other kids their ages that got the interest going! And, afterward it was the questions and answers that took place between the kids, not between the kids and adults.?

### **Eleven key considerations for success:**

The foregoing scenarios present only a few of several possible approaches to developing an interest in bluegrass music in our young people. In addition to the staffing, logistics, environmental and educational plan, the approach, developmental support and sensitivity to the child's needs and learning process are of utmost importance. Here is a list of 11 considerations when working with young people:

1. The introduction method is entirely dependent on the age of both the child and the parent. While these are broad generalizations, very young children are typically excited by the sounds of musical instruments and the tactile experience of plucking a string and hearing the results, while the minds of teenagers are often preoccupied with other interests. (Once they are interested, however, upper level elementary and middle school-aged children have better dexterity and are able to pick up the physical aspect of playing music more easily.) Young parents may not have the patience or skill set to fuel a child's interest, and older parents may not wish to devote the time and attention to the child's learning process. As with anything learned by children, both the stimulus and the response are vitally important.
2. Parents who have been interested in bluegrass music prior to the birth of their child may find that the regular presence of the music in the home is all that is needed to successfully introduce bluegrass music.
3. Children who are allowed to touch musical instruments at a young age may show greater interest as they grow up. Those who are restrained from contact with instruments may have a higher propensity to shy away from instruments or experiment with them as they grow older.
4. Attendance at festivals and the presence or inclusion of children during jams fosters the idea that bluegrass music is acceptable, commonplace and fun. Allowing children to be present, even with the possibility of their interruptions, may have long-term benefits.
5. A parent or teacher who plays fast and well may prove to be too great an obstacle for a successful learning program. For the child to succeed, the goals and expectations of performance must be attainable, and any form of competition with an adult should be avoided. When backing up or accompanying a child, the adult should play at or just slightly above the child's level of expertise.
6. Children who stumble as they work through a song (instrumentally or vocally) should be allowed to do so without being criticized. Encouragement and practice will improve their delivery.
7. Praise and support are the critical components. Adults who play in the presence of children should give the children center stage, praise and continuous encouragement.
8. Forcing the introduction of bluegrass music is not a successful approach. For the development of the interest to succeed, the child must be part of the introductory and growth process. The child must want to be involved because he or she sees participation as fun

and/or rewarding.

9. Allow the child to pick the instrument of his or her choice. Being asked to learn banjo just because Mom or Dad already plays guitar might not be what the child wants to do.

10. Seek the instruction of outside teachers. Instruction from a non-family member is often less intimidating and better received than from someone close to the child.

11. Group programs at schools and festivals allow children to participate with other children, which helps to develop interactive skills, promotes a "band" environment with their peers, stimulates jams with other young people, and places them in a situation conducive to learning.

These eleven considerations do not guarantee that a child will flourish and become a prominent bluegrass performer, but they do help to pave the way for a satisfactory introductory program that will allow the child to decide what he or she wants to do.

### **Summation:**

Clearly, there are numerous approaches to introducing young people to bluegrass music. The foregoing programs and suggestions are not the only methods that can be applied. The possibilities are endless, and imagination and creativity can shape other exciting methods to expose our bluegrass musicians of tomorrow to bluegrass music today.

The author and IBMA welcome hearing about alternate programs that you have either heard about or developed.

### **References and contact information:**

Roger Siminoff

[siminoff@siminoff.net](mailto:siminoff@siminoff.net) <sup>[5]</sup>

805-365-7111

Ken Roddick

[ken@siminoff.net](mailto:ken@siminoff.net) <sup>[6]</sup>

805-801-4890

The Darrell Johnston Kids Lending Library

Sharon & Steve Elliott

[kidslendinglibrary@yahoo.com](mailto:kidslendinglibrary@yahoo.com) <sup>[7]</sup>

510-728-7613

I

Wendy Stockton

Bluegrass Music Society of the Central Coast (BMSCC)

[wstockton@ci.santa-maria.ca.us](mailto:wstockton@ci.santa-maria.ca.us) [8]

CBA Kids on Bluegrass

Frank Solivan, Sr.

408-655-3333

or

Sharon Elliott

[shickey6@yahoo.com](mailto:shickey6@yahoo.com) [9]

510-728-7613

Nancy Cardwell

Foundation for Bluegrass Music, IBMA

[nancyc@ibma.org](mailto:nancyc@ibma.org) [10], [www.bluegrassfoundation.org](http://www.bluegrassfoundation.org) [11]

(888) 438-4262

---

**Source URL:** <https://ibma.org/press/archives/backfilling-bluegrass-audience-how-foster-interest-bluegrass-music-young-people-par-0>

**Links:**

[1] <https://ibma.org/press/archives/backfilling-bluegrass-audience-how-foster-interest-bluegrass-music-young-people-par-0>

[2] <http://www.bluegrassmusic.com/>

[3] <http://www.deeringbanjos.com/>

[4] <http://www.iplaybluegrass.com/>

[5] <mailto:siminoff@siminoff.net>

[6] <mailto:ken@siminoff.net>

[7] <mailto:kidslendinglibrary@yahoo.com>

[8] <mailto:wstockton@ci.santa-maria.ca.us>

[9] <mailto:shickey6@yahoo.com>

[10] <mailto:nancyc@ibma.org>

[11] <http://www.bluegrassfoundation.org>