



MUSIC AS THERAPY

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“Music is the universal language of all mankind.”

-Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Poet

The strum of a guitar, the steady pulse on a drum, the starting pitch of a familiar song... Make no mistake, there is something compelling about music that reaches all of us. It lifts us, inspires us, empathizes with us, and provides a unique pathway for creative expression when we are unable to find the words.

From the very beginning of life, we are exposed to music, through the soothing rhythm of our mother's heartbeat and the melodic pitch of her voice. This experience from the womb is imprinted in our brain, and follows us from birth onward.

By now, you have likely heard of Music Therapy. It has been a method used in healing for centuries, but in recent years has gained attention for its research-based efficacy in helping people in many populations, particularly children.

What is Music Therapy?

In Music Therapy, we use music to measurably improve lives by assisting others in making positive life changes. Through the methodical and practical application of music in a therapeutic environment, we aim to enhance an individual's social, emotional, educational and behavioral development, and accomplished individualized goals. The music therapist is a credentialed, professional therapist and trained musician who assesses emotional well-being, physical health, social functioning, communication abilities, and cognitive skills through musical responses. They then design sessions for individuals and groups based on client needs using music improvisation, performance, receptive music listening, song writing, lyric discussion, and guided imagery. The music therapist generally functions as part of a treatment team in a medical, educational, or community-based program. They may also work as a private practitioner in a variety of clinical settings.

A common misconception is that in order to be a good candidate for music therapy, the client must demonstrate musical aptitude. This is not the case at all! There is strong research and scientific evidence supporting the use of music therapy for many conditions. Practically anyone can benefit from this integrative approach.

So what is it about music that makes it such a powerful tool in children with special needs?

Music is a multi-sensory experience. When we hold a mallet in our hands and hit it against a drum, there are many marvelous processes happening at the same time. Your visual system allows you to observe the movements which helps you to focus on the situation taking place and determine the reaction of the two objects. Your auditory system is letting you hear the sound of the two objects coming together. Your tactile system enables you to feel the objects in your hand, and experience the subtle vibrations from contact.

Music motivates us. When a child sees two objects being used to create a sound, they are naturally inspired to want to recreate that sound by mimicking the actions they've just observed. This can also be beneficial to children who have trouble with communication. Offering them an instrument and asking them if they would like to use it, or prompting them to ask for it, demonstrates to the child the appropriate actions in order to get what they want or need.



My Experience

During my Music Therapy training, we were given the opportunity to practice in a variety of clinical environments, including schools, psychiatric settings, general hospitals, skilled nursing and intermediate care homes, and child and adolescent treatment centers. Throughout all the training, working with children always felt most natural for me. There's something to be said about observing a child's response to making music in the moment.

After graduating college, I had the great privilege of working in a residential program at a local children's hospital serving children and adolescents with special needs and developmental disabilities. I served alongside a wonderful panel of specialists, all committed to helping these children reach their IEP (Individualized Education Program) goals, and enhance and enrich their daily activities. I met with these children in groups, as well as individual sessions. Each music

therapy session varied depending on the clients' needs, and was greatly influenced by what space they were in at the time of our session.

Prior to each session, I would check in with the milieu staff to learn of any incidents or any pertinent information. I would then take the first few minutes to assess the clients' affect through greeting songs and activities. My intent from the moment the session began to the "goodbye song" was to meet the children in their space, using music as the primary guide.

In leading sessions with my clients, I measured success using both quantitative and qualitative information. For example, if a child was working on fine and gross motor skills, I would note if they used adaptive percussive instruments like maracas or mallets. Or if social skill development was part of their IEP, I would report how often the child made eye contact, or took turns with his peers.



Example: "Celeste" successfully used the palmar grasp to pick up and hold the maraca. When musically prompted, she shook the maraca for a total of 20 consecutive seconds".

Likewise, I would make notes of any qualitative observations pertaining to behavior or affect.

Example: "Mason" entered today's Music Therapy session presenting with a happy affect, and remained engaged throughout the entire 30 minute session".

My greatest reward came from working with families in the residential program, as well as in the other settings that followed. Seeing the happiness in the eyes of a parent while

observing their child absorbed in a musical moment, is beyond expression. The experience I gained without a doubt has made an impact on my course and also in my teaching style, as my career has since evolved more into leading interactive parent-child music classes and also performing.

How can I support my child musically?

This is my favorite question to hear from parents. My response is always the same... You do not need to attain a degree in music therapy to musically support your child's development at home. I often have parents and/or caregivers say to me, "I am not musical" or "I can't sing". Regardless of your own opinion of your musical abilities, know that to your child(ren), the sound of your voice and your presence in the music making experience is pure magic. It is as simple as singing their name, instead of speaking it. Here are 3 quick and easy ways to make a musical connection at home.

1. Call and Response

In a basic Call and Response activity, one person offers a phrase and a second person answers with a direct commentary or response to the offered phrase. They then build on each other's offering and work together to move the song along and create a sound that's inventive and collective. What I love most about this activity is that it can be verbal or non-verbal, using instruments or simply tapping hands or feet. The "leader" and "follower" roles are also interchangeable. In one moment, you can initiate the activity by repeating your child, allowing them to be the leader; while in the next moment, you offer a sound or phrase and give your child the opportunity to respond.

2. Audiation

In short, Audiation is to music, as thinking is to speech. It is the sensation of an individual hearing or feeling sound or music when it is not physically present. It is also an essential piece of musicianship. This activity is similar to Call and Response, in that it can be verbal or non-verbal, or using instruments, or different objects. My favorite audiation activity is singing a lullaby, for example, "You Are My Sunshine":

Sung: "You are my _____ *allow space for your child to respond
My only _____*
You make me _____*
When skies are _____*" Etc.

Take a moment to notice their response. What do you hear? Are they responding verbally/ non-verbally? Is their response something physical (smiling, shift in eye gaze, etc)?

3. Lyric Substitution

Lyric Substitution is a technique where we take a familiar song, and change the words to reflect what is happening in the moment. Most of you have already used this technique if you've sung "This is the way we wash our hands, wash our hands..." Do you know what the actual song is? If you guessed "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush", you are right! Using activities like lyrics substitution, are especially useful during transitions throughout the day. When my children were babies, I used a lot of lyric substitution. One of the favorites was using the song "If You're Happy and You Know It":

"Are you ready for a little bit of lunch (cha cha cha)?
Are you ready for a little bit of lunch (cha cha cha)?
A little bit of lunch, a little bit of lunch.
Are you ready for a little bit of lunch (cha cha cha)?"

The great jazz musician Miles Davis once said, "do not fear mistakes. There are none." I cannot emphasize it enough, that when you are making music with your children, the goal is not to seek perfection or create a musical masterpiece, but rather to connect and deepen your bond in a beautiful way. Research has shown us that Oxytocin, known as the "bonding" hormone, is released when making music. So go on and take some musical risks - and have fun!



About the author

Megan Schoenbohm is a beloved children's musician from the San Francisco Bay Area. She graduated from Berklee College of Music in Boston, MA with a degree in Music Therapy, and spent years leading groups and private sessions with children and families. Her children's album, "Bubba & Boo", is available in iTunes, Amazon Music and Spotify.