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Introduction

Music is a unique path to communication and learning for children with autism. Its effectiveness as a therapeutic and learning tool comes from its ability to provide two distinct frameworks for therapy and teaching. Music can create a consistent, stable, and predictable environment. Melody, harmony, and rhythm from a favorite song can provide familiar cues and bring comfort in an unfamiliar or stressful setting. Yet music can also be infinitely flexible: changing with the child from moment to moment, reflecting his or her behavior and emotions.

Music therapy is the prescribed use of music to address non-musical goals in such areas as cognition, communication, and socialization. Music therapists are degree professionals who structure specific therapeutic plans in a variety of educational and health care settings, creating unique interventions for each individual. However, many of the principles of music therapy can be put to use by other therapists, teachers, and parents—even by *people who do not consider themselves musical*.

This book outlines some of the principles of music therapy and provides sample music therapy strategies for use with children on the autism spectrum are provided. Research references and sources for materials. In each chapter, there are suggestions for how you can put this information to use. This book is based on my experiences as a music therapist and on the current research in music therapy. It is not comprehensive, but it will provide examples and starting points. The next steps in the journey will be up to you.

About the Author

Betsey King, MMT, MT-BC is a board-certified music therapist who began her practice in 1984. She has an undergraduate degree in violin performance from the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music and a masters degree in music therapy from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. She spent eight years as the music therapist at Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas, and eight years working with children with special needs in special education and private practice. In 2000, she moved into university teaching and has trained music therapy students at Southern Methodist University and the University of Kansas. She speaks and leads workshops throughout the United States, and is the co-owner and co-author for Prelude Music Therapy Products.

How to Use This Book

Throughout this book you will find two features that will help you incorporate music therapy ideas into your home, classroom or therapy setting.



PLAY ALONG boxes suggest specific things that you can do to apply the information in each chapter.



SONGS AND VISUAL AID PATTERNS from prelude music therapy will help you see how music therapy strategies can be applied to simple goals and objectives.

In addition to these features, this book includes a resource list for equipment, related books and supplies and a list of the prelude music therapy material that include the sample songs and visual aids featured in this text. Also included is information on workshops and presentations you can schedule for further exploration of music therapy; and some helpful phone numbers and internet resources.

Part II:

Nine Therapeutic Characteristics of Music

The following chapters will introduce you to nine ways in which you can use music to facilitate learning and communication.

Each chapter contains examples from my clinical experiences and sample strategies for you to use in teaching, therapy and parenting.








Music Captivates and Maintains Attention

How many children in the autism spectrum do you know for whom “improving attention span” or “increasing on-task behavior” is a goal? Finding an environment in which a child with autism is tuned in without being over-stimulated is a challenge. Music-structured activities can be the answer.

The rhythm of music provides a focal point for attention: current research indicates that we may sense rhythm at a cellular level. Providing a steady beat may help a child organize his or her environment. Changing rhythm to match a child’s activity level may help the child stay with a task longer. The rhythmic, melodic and harmonic consistency of familiar songs can create situations in which simple silence can be a cue for attention.

When Music is Used Effectively

-  It **orients** students toward a teacher, therapist or parent.
-  It **alerts** students that important information is coming.
-  It **helps** students refocus if their attention wanders.

A classroom can be chaotic for a child on the autism spectrum. Posters on the walls and interesting spaces in between them, the sounds from a group of children in the hall outside, and the sounds of coughing from the child sitting at the next desk can all be interesting and/or distracting.

The home environment can be equally challenging with the dog barking in the back yard, the sound of a toilet flushing upstairs, the way the sunlight is filtering through the blinds, or the face of an unfamiliar visitor.

The first step toward learning and communication, therefore, is helping a child focus on the information that is important. Several "acoustic" therapies have been created to help children in the autism spectrum learn to filter, tolerate, and/or prioritize the sound frequencies around them. Although many of these techniques have children listen to recorded music, they are a separate category from music therapy.

Music is a potent cue, especially when it is chosen to be distinct from the sounds already in the environment. I recently completed an assessment in a life-skills class at local high school. The students, all of whom had severe disabilities, were called to the morning orientation sessions with a tape recording of a bugle call. As the tape started, I noticed that several students looked towards the music, others got up and began moving toward the area for the activity. Almost every student demonstrated that he or she recognized that another part of their day was about to begin. The pitch and quality of the bugle sound, while not piercing, was distinct from the rather considerable ambient noise of the classroom, it was age-appropriate for the class (as opposed to a children's song), and it was brief—it did not last long enough to become just another sound in the overall environment.

The Contact Song

One of the first things a music therapist usually looks for in working with a new student or students is a CONTACT SONG. The contact song might be a pre-planned song. It might be a song composed on the spot, reflecting something the student is doing, or it might be a song that the therapist has been told is one of the student's favorites.

"Contact song" (a term used by Edith Boxill in her book "Music Therapy for the developmentally disabled") is a term for the music that accompanies the first connection with a student: the moment when reciprocal communication first takes place. That communication might be eye contact, the acceptance of a touch, singing, smiling: any signal the child chooses that indicates his or her active participation.

Several years ago, I was hired to provide music therapy-related services for a boy in the local school system. I was taking over the work from another therapist who had to give up the contract.

The young man, then age 8, was autistic, and had significant difficulties working on any task for more than a few seconds. The school personnel, at the time, had little training in working with someone with his needs and often placed him alone in a classroom with a teacher and an aide.

In talking with me about this student, the previous music therapist shared their contact song – “I Have a dinosaur.” This was a simple color identification song that she sang while showing various colored shapes to the student and their moment of contact came when she showed him an orange jack-o-lantern shape and sang, “I Have a Pumpkin - its color is orange.

The student had thereafter greeted her each day with the words, “Candle! Candle!” She soon realized that this was his way of asking for the pumpkin song (as a candle is found inside a jack-o-lantern). On days when the young man was particularly anxious or over-stimulated, she had found that this song allowed him to focus and calm himself.

So, as we went over the transfer information for him, the therapist gave me the pumpkin shape and sang me the song.

On my first day in the young man’s classroom, he was quite upset. He was already having a difficult day and the presence of a stranger did not help. For the first few minutes after I arrived, he ran around the room, taking things off shelves and throwing them to the floor. I attempted to engage him with a greeting song, then with some rhythm instruments.

Finally, I sat down at a small table and pulled the pumpkin shape out of my bag. Within 3 seconds of my beginning to sing “I Have A Pumpkin,” the student was seated across from me, holding the pumpkin shape, making frequent eye contact, and singing along.



"I Have a Dinosaur"
appears at the end of this chapter.

In order to make music work for you in gaining and maintaining a child's attention, you will want to remember these three words:

 **Rhythm**  **Discretion**  **Silence**

Rhythm. If I sang an otherwise familiar song but held each note for an inconsistent, unpredictable amount of time, not only would the song become almost unrecognizable – you might lose the interest or ability to focus on my singing.

Oooooohhh, saycanyouseeeeeeeee, bythe-dawn's
eeearly....lightwhatsoproudly weeeeeeee.....hailedatthe
twiiiiiiiiiiii.....light's lastgleeeeeeeeeeeeming.

Rhythm, the arrangement of notes around a steady beat, provides an important focal point.

I saw a demonstration of this when I did an assessment for a student who was not meeting the goal of reading aloud. I read him a book that had short phrases that could be presented rhythmically.

As I read, I snapped my fingers to create a beat. When I was finished, I gave him the book and asked him to read aloud. I tried a variety of verbal and gestural prompts but, although he was looking at the book and turning the pages, he was not speaking.

I turned the book back to the first page and, without saying anything, began to snap my fingers. Immediately, he began reading out loud.



PLAY ALONG

Picture books that illustrate songs, and book that can be read rhythmically, are wonderful tools for encouraging students to work on such goals as word recognition, reading, tracking, and using speech. Some books that you might enjoy using are:

Charlie Parker Played Be-Bop

by Chris Raschka (Orchard Books, 1992, ISBN0531059995)

What A Wonderful World

by George Davis Weiss, Bob Thiele; illustrated by Ashley Bryan
(Atheneum, 1995, ISBN0689800878)

Take Me Out To The Ball Game

by Jack Norworth; illustrated by Alex Gillman
(Four Winds, 1993, ISBN0027359913)

Chika-Chika Boom-Boom

by Bill Martin, Jr, John Achambault; illustrated by Lois Ehlert
(Simon & Schuster, 1989, ISBN067167949X)

Worksong

by Gary Paulsen, illustrated by Ruth Wright Paulsen
(Harcourt Brace & Company, 1997, ISBN0152009809)