Music Therapy Techniques to Improve Communication Skills in Persons with Autism

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Music Therapy...

... is the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional who has completed an approved music therapy program.

(American Music Therapy Association definition, 2005)
Requirements to be certified as a music therapist:

- Bachelor’s degree in music therapy (or equivalent coursework)
- 6-month internship
- National board certification exam
- Maintain 100 CE credits every 5 years

Non-musical goals:

- Cognitive
- Academic
- Motor
- Emotional
- Social
- Leisure
What do music therapists do?

- Assess client’s needs
- Determine appropriate goals
- Identify objectives
- Plan & conduct therapy activities
- Document clients progress toward goals
- Provide follow-up

Children with autism experience impairments in...

- Social relationships and social interactions
- Verbal and nonverbal communication
- Often exhibit restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior
Why music therapy for children with autism?

- Show a preference for musical stimuli
- Find repetitive elements appealing
- Fosters creativity and self-expression
- Music affects the whole person (cognitive, physical, neurological, & emotional areas)

Benefits of music therapy for people with autism:

- Deals with concrete concepts
- Promotes emotional communication through verbal and non-verbal means
- Promotes social interaction
- Provides both structure and freedom
- Stimulates many senses
- Highly motivational
- Promotes joint attention
Music therapy goals for children with autism:

- Increase tolerance of stimuli
- Promote verbal/non-verbal dialogues
- Increase self-expression
- Develop spontaneity and flexibility
- Decrease obsessive behaviors
- Increase awareness of others

Music therapy techniques:

- **Repetitive patterns**: offers security
- **Melodic phrases**: anticipates actions
- **Active silences**: elicits response
- **Vocal improvisations**: fosters vocal communication
- **Instrumental improvisations**: encourages non-verbal communication
- **Carrier of Information**: teaches needed skills
Alexa – 5-year old female

Weaknesses

- Short attention span
- Doesn’t initiate conversation
- Uses 1-2 word phrases to answer questions
- Doesn’t participate in group activities

Strengths

- Speech is clear and understandable
- Good academic skills
- Good fine/gross motor skills
- Able to maintain attention when paired with singing

Alexa

- Four in a Boat – *greeting responses*
- What Do You Do? – *question/answer responses*
- The Best Helper – *social/peer interaction*
- Leader of the Band – *turn taking and leader/follower roles*
Noah – 8-year old male

Weaknesses
- Gives 1-2 word responses to questions
- Doesn’t initiate conversation
- Exhibits poor conversation skills

Strengths
- Speech is understandable
- Good academic skills
- Able to quickly remember lyrics and musical phrases

Noah

- Getting to Know Someone – eye contact and question/answer responses
- Pentatonic bell improvisation – listening and expressive skills, joint attention
- You Go First – increase awareness of others
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**All That I Can Be** written by Sally K. Albrecht and Jay Althouse

- *All That I Can Be: 15 Unison songs to Build Character and Integrity in Young People*
- Copyright 2002 by Alfred Publishing
- P.O. Box 10003, 16320 Roscoe Blvd., Van Nuys, CA 91410-0003
- www.alfred.com
Mark – 9-year old male

Weaknesses

- Poor social and verbal interaction skills
- Poor academic skills
- Whines and makes up stories at inappropriate times

Strengths

- Creative imagination
- Enjoys singing
- Motivated to participate in music activities

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Mark

- I Have a Word and I Can Spell – encourages vocalizations
- Singing/Reading to a familiar tune - encourages speech fluency
- Things I’m Thankful For – encourages self-expression
Example of music therapy session:

- Hello Song 🎵
- Pass It Along 🎵
- Tone Chimes
- Good-bye Song

Finding a music therapist

- Contact the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) at findMT@musictherapy.org or

- American Music Therapy Association, Inc.
  8455 Colesville Road, Suite 1000
  Silver Spring, Maryland 20910, USA
  Phone: (301) 589-3300
  Fax: (301) 589-5175
References


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