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Music Therapy: Therapy that is Music for the Mind and Soul

by Dortia Berger, M.A., B.C.-M.T. (article from Reaching Out Jan/Feb 1999)

Whether you listen to soothe your stress or uplift your spirit, there exists a simple pleasure in music. Today, certified music therapists provide the clinical application of the musical experience. Music has inherent qualities to stimulate and foster human growth and personal wellness. Music therapy allows for verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as, physical contact to improve pathways toward overall well being by establishing critical connections between the music and its rhythm with the person and the world around them.

What happens during any given music therapy session relies heavily upon the physical, emotional and mental state of the client during the session. Each session evolves uniquely out of the person's behavior and moods, but within the framework of his or her long-term goals. If a person is expressing unhappiness, it is okay to sing a song about feeling sad—associations are being made between the child's internal state and the external world. As the child's mood or behavior changes, the music should adjust to reflect those changes. The body begins to pace itself according to the tempo and rhythms presented during the therapy session.

All music is therapeutic, whether slow or fast— slow rhythms relax, while fast rhythms energize. Medium to slow rhythms of 60-80 beats per minute (about that of the human heart and our normal pacing) can relax the system, while quicker beats can energize the sensory reflexes. If you think about your own body's reaction to slow music and its tendency to lull us off to sleep or you think about the energizing effect of fast rhythms during an aerobic workout, you can understand music's effect on our systems. Slow music gives the brain an opportunity to process the stimulating sounds more easily. However one may not always seek to relax the system, especially if it is already less mobile. In therapy, if the child is lethargic or slow to respond then quicker, upbeat tempos may be used. And because music is a "whole-brain" activity, it has the capacity to sharpen certain sensory processes, create resonance with the environment and increase one's ability to connect to others.

A child's musical experience should extend into his or her home, where parents are encouraged to play music that reflects the taste and lifestyle of the family. As comforting as music can be for the child, it is equally so for the adult listener. This allows both to participate in the same therapeutic medium. When singing to your child it is best to use a lot of exaggerated vocal inflections. While it may sound silly to us, it does not sound at all silly to a special-needs brain. However, when playing music some caution should be given to assure that it is not too agitating. Hard rock music, for example, can be especially irritating to people with deficits. As a whole, the music should have a comfortable beat, with not too deep a bass and limited vocals.

Large orchestral works are not especially recommended, since there is much complex auditory information which most people are unable to process, let alone children with



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particular disabilities. Unfortunately, many records of classics for kids tend to have mostly orchestral music excerpts, and offer too much variety to be really focused on any particular purpose. Children's song tapes and the like are almost always recorded too fast for any child to follow. However, Baroque music, such as that of Bach, Handel, Hayden, Vivaldi, tends to have movements which flow in the 60-80-beats per minute realm, and generally does not include massive orchestrations. Piano solo music is especially recommended, and solo works of Chopin, such as the Noctures and Waltzes, or early piano works of Mozart are desirable. Recordings of Flute Music of the American Indians is especially soothing and interesting as are some of the works of Hayden and Mozart, written for String Quartets.

Finally, it is critical to remember that music therapy is a cumulative creative process that provides the possibility for bringing about positive change over the long-term. Occasionally, the desired affect is observed immediately, more often than not, a substantially longer period of time is required before more prominent developmental changes and transformations become observable. A danger exists in looking for responses—we can not assume that because we cannot see it that is not there, or that a response is not being programmed. No time limit exists between applying the stimulus and its response. Therefore, for the therapy to have any chance of success, it is important to apply, and apply, and continue to apply it with no assumptions, no expectations and no illusions about when, why or in what form the results will be obtained. Simply, have the courage to make music a part of your child's life and nourish them with it.