

# What is Music Therapy and how does it work?

By Dawn O'Brien

No matter your age both adults and children can find a deep benefit from Music Therapy. But what is it? Music Therapy is the development of Communication, Vocalizations, Body Awareness and Verbalization through movement, sound and music. It can help with coordination and reduce stress and anxiety as well as helping children overcome monotonic speech and promotes self expression.

Many studies have conformed that both Children and Adults on the Autism Spectrum respond very well to sound and music. It allows the Music Therapist to gain their attention when little else does. This makes this type of therapy an amazing way to help our ASD kiddos express themselves through social interaction and movement. Learning the words to songs, learning to sing greetings and playing with instruments can help increase a child vocabulary. So let's look a bit deeper...

## Sound and Music can help with Stress and Anxiety

It is well known that children on the Autism Spectrum have a much harder time dealing with Stress and Anxiety. They often have issues filtering out and processing the sounds they hear and the world around them. This can all be very overwhelming. Playing Classical Music or sounds with a predictable cadence (steady beat) can help alleviate anxiety. Studies have shown that after only 16 short 20 minute sessions children that participated in rhythmic music therapy appeared to have significantly reduced stress levels.

## Communication and Music

Did you know that up to thirty-percent of our ASD Children are non-verbal? Many more have a challenging time understanding verbal cues and body awareness. Using musical games like Hot Potato and Musical Chairs can help with hand eye coordination and fine motor skills. When our children learn the words to a song the repetitive signing of those words can help retrain the pathways in the brain. This can lead to improved speech and communications, not to mention it's a lot of fun.

Music Therapy has not only been proven to bring about changes in cognitive abilities and social behaviour but it's also another form of play. To make sure our ASD Children never feel like the therapy is work it needs to be engaging. Here are a few games you can play at home to keep your kiddos singing and enjoying the music!

## Dancing to the Music

I know it may seem a bit obvious but Dancing or Moving to music helps our Children to express themselves physically and emotionally. Letting your child dance and express to all different kinds of music will help promote body awareness. You can jump in there and dance with them. Help your child create a "Dance Space" and decorate it for fun. Buy cheap curtains or hang fabric and frame it like a stage. Turn the Music on and let them dance their hearts out!

### **Find or Make Fun Instruments**

Creating the instruments your kiddos will use can be so much fun and rewarding. You can make it a sensory experience by making shakers. You can use any type of container that your child can hold. Empty pop bottles of all sizes or Tupperware containers all make a great instrument. By using a funnel, you can use rice, dried beans, dried pasta, and beads really anything. Let your imagination run wild. Let your child experiment with the levels you fill the containers as it changes the tone and sound. Once you have your instruments you can start off by shaking them in time with already familiar songs. This teaches your child to learn rhythm patterns. Once your child has mastered the shakers you can introduce singing at the same time. Each action helps activate a different part of the brain. What a great way to spend time with your child.

### **Hot Potato**

This is an Oldie but a Goodie. The idea is to keep the object moving until the Music stops. If the object is in your hands when the Music ends you are out. Choose an object that your child is not terribly attached to, this way they will readily pass it along. Anything from a tennis ball to a pillow will work. Hot Potato is a very social game so involve the whole family, invite over friends and have fun with it. Arrange everyone in a circle. You can either pass the item around in the same direction or toss it back and forth all over the circle. This will help greatly with hand eye coordination. Keep your eye on behaviours; make sure the game stays happy, positive and fun. Played right this game will produce a lot of laughter.

### **Musical Emotions**

This game is similar to Hot Potato but is aimed at slightly older children. You sit in a large circle and pass a hat around as the Music begins. In the hat are recipe cards with either an emotion written on it or a face with an emotion. When the Music stops the person holding the hat must reach in and pull out a card. Then they stand and act out the emotion without words and everyone else has to guess it. Once the emotion is guessed you can discuss how to recognize that emotion in others . Again always watch behaviours and aim for creating positive ones.

### **Music and Bubbles**

This last one is for any child who loves bubbles! This one is simple, turn on your child's favorite song, let them get up and dance while you blow bubbles!! If you have access to a

bubble machine, that would be even better. Sing in silly voices, have your child clap and pop the bubbles in time with the Music. Go ahead, have fun and have a Bubble Dance Party!!!

I hope this has helped shed some light on Music Therapy and its benefits. Now get out there and get Dancing with your child!