



music as therapy
international

The Role of Music as Therapy for Children and Young People with Disabilities

What is music as therapy

Music as therapy is the use of music and sound in a structured setting to promote the mental, physical, emotional and social well-being of an individual.

Music as therapy is not music education and while children and adolescents may pick up basic musical skills, such as how to play a certain instrument, this is not the aim of the work.

Using music as therapy with children and young people with disabilities

When using music as therapy, the music is used initially to establish a point of contact with the child or adolescent and then as a means of addressing, within a safe, secure environment, whatever difficulties the child/adolescent is experiencing. For example, it may be used with children who are withdrawn and unresponsive to draw them into shared musical activity. It can equally be used to channel – in a positive and constructive way – the energies of very active individuals. Group work can be used to develop and practice social skills, such as awareness and appreciation of other group members, listening, turn-taking and leadership skills.

Benefits of music as therapy for children and young people with disabilities

Structured musical activities and improvisation using simple percussion instruments can be used to promote skills that children/adolescents with disabilities may need help to develop, including:

- Attention and listening
- Non-verbal expression
- Communication skills
- Turn-taking and leadership
- Social understanding and confidence



Using music as therapy in a school

Anyone working with, or supporting, children and adolescents with disabilities, including teachers, support teachers, music teachers, etc. can use music as therapy; and no prior musical skills or professional musical background are needed.



- ✓ Music is non-verbal, it can engage everyone regardless of any limitations.
- ✓ Music is highly stimulating and it is a motivator.
- ✓ Collaborative music-making encourages self-expression, interaction and creativity.
- ✓ Music is an excellent way to sustain attention.

“ This musical therapy is very important for our children because it motivates them and keeps them alert. They can be very motivated as long as they have this kind of sessions and the instruments.

Parent from FENAID

In our experience, music-making with other people can help children in educational contexts:

- To increase self-confidence
- To improve concentration and focus
- To improve awareness of others
- To learn how to share with others (particularly important for those who are controlling in groups)
- To develop creativity and self-expression
- To have positive group experiences and fun
- To help develop language

Activity songs can also be used to promote educational aims and reinforce concepts, such as colours and numbers, and to develop new vocabulary.

Music as therapy in Ethiopia

Fikir Ethiopian National Association on Intellectual Disabilities (FENAID) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, provides music as therapy sessions for individuals with disabilities at their day centre.

“ I want people to know that I am an intellectually disabled person but I am capable of doing anything; and I want to let people know that intellectual disabled people are capable of doing anything if they are given an opportunity.

Self-Advocate with disabilities at FENAID



Evidence based references

Aldridge et al. (1995); Carpentre (2016); Choi et al. (2010); Chong & Kim (2010); Curtis & Mercado (2004); Delucia-Waack & Gellman (2007); Dezfoolian et al. (2013); Dorothea (2012); Edgerton (1994); Eidson (1989); Gadberry & Harrison (2016); Gantt (2000); Gattino et al. (2011); Holck (2004); Keen (2005); Kim (2006); Kim et al. (2008); Kivland (1986); Lee & McFerran (2012); Lowry et al. (2019); Meadows (1997); Mossler et al. (2017); Nicholls (2002); Nordoff & Robbins (1977); Porter et al (2017); Sacks (1995); Thompson (2012); Toolan & Coleman (1994); Watson (2007)

Scan the QR Code to the right or [click here](#) to read more of what the self-advocate at FENAID has to say about how music as therapy has had a positive impact on his life (pp.5-7 of the newsletter)



Scan the OR Code to the left or [click here](#) to learn more about where else music as therapy is being used in Ethiopia.