



Interactive  
Music-Making  
for Adults with  
Learning  
Disabilities

## Musical Activities

A resource pack for UK Partners  
working with adults with learning disabilities



music as therapy  
international

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# Acknowledgements

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Whilst the activities are expressed in their words and reflect their individual approaches to working with people with learning disabilities, they are undoubtedly indebted to Amelia Oldfield & John Bean (Oldfield & Bean, 1991, 2001) and Elaine Streeter (Streeter 1979, 1980, 2002). We are grateful for their kind permission to include activities developed from their writing, which has become integral to contemporary music therapy practice.

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Streeter, E. (1980) *Making Music with the Young Child with Special Needs a Guide for Parents*, Music Therapy Publications. London.

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Other Activity Booklets available:

- Interactive Music-Making: Musical Activities for the Under 5's
- Music as Therapy for Young Children with Disabilities
- Interactive Music-Making with People Living with Dementia

Available from [info@musicastherapy.org](mailto:info@musicastherapy.org)

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# Introduction

*Music as Therapy International* provides training and support for people wanting to embed music into the care and education of vulnerable children and adults worldwide. Over a number of weeks the care setting staff and the charity's music therapists share their skills with each other to find ways music can be made integral to care, activities and social interaction. We call this approach interactive music-making (see page 2).

This resource booklet is a selection of the musical activities that were developed within interactive music-making training projects provided by the charity to settings caring for adults with learning disabilities; activities which can be used to address the strengths and needs of your clients.

Normally the activities in this booklet would be reinforced through training provided by *Music as Therapy International*. If you would like to receive training to help you work with people with disabilities or other vulnerable groups (in the UK or overseas), or if you have any questions about the resources within this booklet, please contact [info@musicastherapy.org](mailto:info@musicastherapy.org) or visit [www.musicastherapy.org](http://www.musicastherapy.org)

# Interactive Music-Making

**Interactive music-making** can be defined as the use of music and sound in a structured setting to promote the mental, physical, emotional and social well-being of an individual. It is a person-centred approach, adapting to the strengths of the individual person and fostering their potential.

Interactive music-making is not music education; while session participants may pick up basic musical skills, this is not the aim of the work. The music is used initially to establish a point of contact with the individual and then as a means of addressing, within a safe, secure environment, whatever difficulties the person is experiencing. For example, it may be used with people who are withdrawn and unresponsive to draw them into a 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. Individual work can be used for many of the same aims, as well as building positive relationships with carers.

## Guidance for Using this Booklet

All people, regardless of ability, can appreciate and respond to music. When this music is tailored to the needs of individuals, with live, interactive elements, it becomes a means of communication, of self-expression, social interaction and enjoyment. This resource pack presents a broad range of musical activities, with a variety of different aims. They are designed to be used flexibly within structured music sessions, to meet the needs of the individuals you are working with. The activities are mostly written with group sessions in mind, but many can also be adapted for use with individuals.

More important than what you do is how you do it; pay careful attention to the information surrounding the activities, and refer back to any notes from your original training.

You don't need to start at the beginning and work your way through every activity included here. Nor do you need to stick to the activity as described. Think carefully about the aims of your work with particular individuals, and choose activities that might focus on these aims, as well being appealing, engaging and age-appropriate for those adults.

If an activity doesn't work the first time, don't give up. The people you are working with may need time to get used to a new activity and the process of trying it a number of times

over a number of weeks will be beneficial in itself. You may find you need to modify the central idea – maybe they need fewer choices of instrument, or a chance to move about whilst playing. Take your lead from them, and don't be afraid to try new things or to get creative yourself.

This resource pack is not definitive. We have no doubt that you'll start inventing your own activities, or that ideas will emerge from those that you work with that you can incorporate into your sessions. If in doubt, always bring your session planning back to your aims for both individuals and for the group as a whole: do your chosen activities address these aims, or can you find a new activity that might do so more effectively?

## Why Music?

Music has long been recognized for the contribution it can make to people's health and well-being. Music Therapy is a recognized clinical discipline with well-evidenced benefits for people with disabilities, emotional difficulties, mental health difficulties and a wide variety of additional needs. It is of note that the majority of research studies looking at the role of music therapy for people with disabilities have been undertaken within special education or focusing on children with learning disabilities. Whilst research into the role of music therapy for adults with learning disabilities does exist, this population is under-represented in the current evidence. This is likely to be for many reasons, but the issues regarding the challenges of gaining informed consent from and the full participation of adults with learning disabilities could be contributing factors.

Despite these limitations, research gives us confidence that music can be an effective tool for adults with learning disabilities to develop communication and social skills, interpersonal skills and to build relationships. As a non-verbal medium, music can be a powerful way to support the emotional development and self-expression of a person with a learning disability, to encourage interaction and diffusing stress associated with interacting; it can enhance wellbeing more widely, reducing anxiety and agitation. Participation in music-making can give an individual opportunities to express their preferences, act independently and make choices. And all of the above is proven to increase self-confidence and self-esteem, acceptance and success.

If you're interested in the research see our **Music and Adults with Learning Disabilities** (Appendix 1).

## Getting the Most from Your Sessions: Defining Your Aims

Having reminded ourselves why music is valuable, it is worth thinking about how we can maximise on its value. All people, regardless of ability, can appreciate and respond to music. When this music is tailored to the needs of individuals, with live, interactive elements, it becomes a means of communication, self-expression, social interaction and enjoyment. It can help to build confidence and promote independence and decision-making. Your aims for your clients can change and be adapted over time. Some typical aims might be:

- To build relationships and reduce isolation.
- To stimulate imagination, creativity and play.
- To provide motivating, meaningful activity tailored to each session participant.
- To develop general skills such as turn-taking, listening, waiting and leading.
- To encourage physical movement and co-ordination.
- To offer a non-verbal outlet for emotional release and exploration.

Think about the person/people you are seeing, and make sure you are clear on what your aims are for them. How could the music session help them with these aims? What progress was made in previous sessions that you could build upon? Remember, your aims do not have to stay fixed, and may change and be adapted over time.

# Planning Your Sessions

## Session Content

### 1) Structure

It is important to have a clear structure for your sessions. A sense of routine and consistency can help your service users to get the most out of their sessions. They will learn what to expect and become increasingly comfortable and able to participate to the fullest.

You should have routines for the beginning and for the end of your session that stay the same each week.

### 2) Activities

For the main content of your session, include a variety of different activities depending on the aims, needs and abilities of the individuals. These could include balancing lively activities with being still and concentrating, activities that have everyone playing together balanced with solo playing or turn-taking, or balancing free improvisation-based activities with more structured games.

You don't need to include all these types of activities in every session. Think of the current participants' aims, and choose activities that have complementary aims to these. Each week you can incorporate familiar activities that have worked well in the past alongside one or two new activities. Adapt old activities so they are more effective or don't feel stale.

### 3) Example Session Plan

- **Greeting Song** acknowledging everyone by name
- Everyone playing **together**
- Opportunities for **solo playing**
- Activity where each group member is **equal**
- Activity where everyone has the chance to be **leader**
- **Physical movement**



- **Vocal activity** – e.g. singing or humming
- **Taking turns**, waiting and listening
- **Goodbye Song**

**Remember:** Bear in mind that you will often need to be flexible with this plan in the moment.

## Setting Up the Session

### 1) Space

Find a space that is quiet and as free from distractions as possible. If necessary, make a sign to put on doors saying 'Music session in progress, please do not disturb'. Try to keep the set-up as consistent as possible from week to week, to instigate feelings of familiarity. If something about the session space has to change, try to give the service users advance warning of it, if possible, and acknowledge the change at the beginning of the session.

### 2) Organising the Room

Set up the room, chairs, and instruments as you want them before the participants arrive. For a group session, chairs should be in a circle. Think about the best spots for supporting members of staff to sit – for example, next to anyone who might need extra support with holding instruments.

### 3) Consistent Time Slots

Keep to the same time slot each week. Starting and finishing on time will mean that service users always know when the group will start and end. This can be particularly helpful for those who can be anxious in a group as they know when it will end, and those who can be frustrated or impatient if the group starts late. Make sure the length of the slot is appropriate for the individuals; 20 minutes of really positive work is better than an hour of unfocused work. Again, if the timing of the session has to change, try to give the service users advance warning of it, if possible, and acknowledge the change at the beginning of the session.

## During the Session

### 1) *Leading the Group*

Staff members should be consistent in their approach to leading, as they are in a position to greatly influence the group. Try to come to sessions positive and prepared for the planned session, but also ready to be flexible – for example, skipping an activity, or using a different instrument to what you planned if a service user is really drawn to something else. Think of the group aims, and try and leave other worries at the door.

**Remember:** If you are not leading an activity, model participation and lead by example.

### 2) *Allowing Expression*

Music sessions should be free from judgements and expectations. Think of yourself as a facilitator, not a teacher, and allow freedom – even the freedom not to play (for some, attending the group may be all they can manage to start with). This is a time and place for service users to express themselves freely. Focus on the individuals and allow them to lead.

### 3) *Being Patient*

Take time; silence and space are not bad things! Adults with learning disabilities often need more time to process things, so give them space to respond in their own time and their own way.

### 4) *Group Dynamics*

Be aware of the group dynamic. If you feel that a particular person tends to dominate the improvisations or, on the other hand, withdraws from them, then it might be useful to be sensitive to this in your playing. You may also feel it appropriate to bring it to the attention of the group using words.

### 5) *Late-comers*

Incorporate any late-comers to the group as quickly as possible. If a service user does not want to attend a session, or wants to leave early, remind them of the time of the session and explain that the time is still available for them but that they can choose to leave if they want. Give them the option of returning within the time slot –

they may just need a 5-minute break and then be able to return.

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### **7) Additional Needs of Group Members**

Be aware of the sensory needs of group members; if the activity requires people to follow visual cues, e.g. conducting, you will need to provide additional support to visually impaired group members.

### **8) Dealing with Challenging Behaviour**

In the case of challenging behaviour emerging, be aware of the protocol regarding physical boundaries with your service user. Keep this consistent and reiterate these boundaries when necessary, for instance by saying *“We don’t hurt each other and we don’t hurt the instruments”*.

When a service user pushes boundaries, try to think about what this is communicating. Are they angry? Jealous? Frustrated? Why might they be feeling like this? Could they be hungry/need the toilet? Sometimes it can be helpful to name the feeling being expressed: *“John, I understand that you feel angry right now”* If you think you might know the reason behind the feeling, then it is often helpful to name and acknowledge this too, for instance: *“I wonder if you are feeling cross because the session started late today?”*

### **9) After the Session**

Keep a notebook of what you have done so you have a list of the activities you used. Take note of what worked and what didn’t work so well, and why. If possible, meet with any other staff members who were in the session to discuss. It’s a good idea to start planning for the next session at this point – much easier while it’s fresh in your mind!

# The Interactive Music-Making Approach

## 1) Techniques to Help You in Your Sessions

Remember, when in doubt:

### **WAIT      WATCH & LISTEN      RESPOND**

**Wait** to see how your participant(s) respond to you and the instruments. These things do not need to be rushed and very often people need more time to process things than you realise. Silence is ok!

**Watch and Listen** for what the individual or group does – even things such as breathing, and any vocal sounds or body movements.

**Respond** in a way that you feel is appropriate – stay aware of body language/facial gestures/changes in breathing/changes in mood, and try to respond to these.

**If you are leading, encourage freedom.** Think of yourself as a facilitator, not a teacher... If you start out with the power, do your best to give it away!

**Invite and encourage people to play.** Allow them to choose how they want to participate. For some, attending the group maybe all they can manage to start with.

**It's not all about the music.** Some moments of verbal reflection, reminiscence, observation, can be very valuable.

**Accept without judgement<sup>1</sup>.** Some members may not want to play or may play in unusual ways. Allow them the freedom to participate as they wish.

**If someone chooses not to play,** this could be a very conscious choice. Don't take their hand and force them. Instead, ask them if they would like some help to play and, depending on their answer, gently encourage them or entice them by doing it alongside them.

You can also think about the following words when you reflect on the sessions:

**... MATCHING    FOLLOWING    MIRRORING    LEADING    TAKING TURNS ...**

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<sup>1</sup> **Remember:** Making music is usually fun, but it is also a space to address more difficult feelings (anxiety, grief, anger), and it is important to allow all feelings to be present. There is no need to cheer everyone up, or even to encourage everyone too strongly to participate. Allow people the time and space to decide for themselves what to offer.

## DEFINITIONS

### Matching

Matching is when you, as a facilitator, play music that is not *exactly* the same but matches the style and overall mood of the person/people you are working with, with ideas that might encourage someone to join in. *For example, if someone is gently humming to themselves and looking thoughtfully out of the window, you might gently offer the first phrase(s) of, "Somewhere over the rainbow" and wait, watch and listen to see how they respond. Matching can be what you are doing when you choose a song in response to the mood of an individual or a group.*

### Leading

As the word suggests, the facilitator would 'lead' the music.

### Mirroring

This is essentially copying what the participant is doing with as much attention to detail as possible, including picking up on mood and dynamics. You don't necessarily have to be using the same instrument.

### Taking turns

This is really self-explanatory and often happens when you allow space for turn-taking to happen. This will involve waiting sometimes for a response but can very quickly become an exciting and spontaneous, playful interaction.

### Following

This is where the facilitator would allow the resident to lead and perhaps wait to see what happens, responding if and when they feel it is appropriate. In these moments it is important to try to 'support' what the resident is offering through listening, a gentle hum or song.

Another way to do this is to change the words of a song to acknowledge what is happening... E.g to the tune of *My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean*, " Oh Alan I see you are playing, the xylophone here today, Oh Alan I see you are playing the xylophone here today."

Or it might be just gently supporting him/her through playing an instrument or clapping hands, perhaps banging a drum hard if the participant is feeling the need for some strong support.

## 2) Reflection after the session

**Think about what happened.** What worked, what didn't and why not?

**Think about how to adapt** or add to things for the next session.

**Make some notes** about what happened in your session:

- What did you do?
- Did your session participant(s) say, do or try anything new?
- Did they particularly enjoy or dislike any specific part of the session?
- What was their mood like (e.g. content, distracted, anxious, focused etc.)?
- What aspects of communication did you notice between the session participants or between one participant and yourself?
- What went well?
- What would you do differently next time?

Reading back your notes might also help you to identify themes that are important for particular people. Perhaps you notice some recurring topics or behaviours, that will help you understand and care for a particular person. Does a certain song always calm them down? Do they like to speak about a certain event? Are there specific triggers for a session participant you've noticed in your music sessions which might help people understand them better in other situations? This might be useful information to re-introduce in your next session or to share with your colleagues.

Your notes will help you monitor progress, change, strengths and areas of difficulty in your session participants.

# Activities

## Beginnings and Endings

### **Aims:**

- To establish a clear routine to the session
- To check in and allow the leader to gauge the current state of each participant
- To develop awareness of the other group members

In each session, for individuals or groups, it is a good idea to open the session with a starting routine, and end with a closing routine. This should be the same each week and will help orientate the participant at the beginning of the session and mark the end of a session.

These routines do not need to be complex. It could be a simple melody sung or played to each participant. Or you could simply play a beat on a tambourine or drum and sing 'hello' or 'goodbye' to the participant/participants.

When you are greeting each person, make eye contact with them, smile at them; show by your body language that you are pleased to see them. You can also adapt the style of your singing in a similar way. For example, if they seem excited, you could sing in a lively, excited manner, or if they seem timid or quiet, sing gently to them. This will let them know you are listening to them and leave them with a feeling/experience of being important and responded to as an individual. It will help develop their confidence and expression, focus their attention and motivate them to engage.

### **1) Opening Routines**

Choose one or more of the following to start your session each week:

- Have a check-in with each member of the group. This could be verbal, if appropriate to the abilities of your participants – simply asking each in turn how they are doing today. It could also be musical – passing an instrument around and asking each group member to play something that sounds like how they're feeling today.
- Choose a piece of recorded music and have it playing as the group enters the room each week. You should use the same music for several weeks at least;

check-in with your group if they would like a new piece of music.

- Choose a particular instrument that will always be used for the start of the session. Pass it round the group and have a short improvisation with them - either using your voice or another instrument - to say hello to each individual.
- Choose a song to sing together at the start of each session. This could be a Hello Song you make up, or an existing song, either sung as the original or with new words. For example, the following words could be sung to the melody of 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean':

*Now we sing hello to Annie  
Now we sing hello to you  
Now we sing hello to Annie  
It's time for music today  
Oh, welcome, welcome, it's music time today, today  
Welcome, welcome, it's music time today*

## 2) Closing Routines

Here are some ideas for ways to finish your sessions:

- Sing a familiar song together at the end of each session. 'We'll Meet Again' is a good one, or 'Show Me the Way to Go Home!'
- Play a particular piece of recorded music as the group leave each week.
- Compose a simple Goodbye Song that everyone would be able to join in singing or playing with. For example, you could make up a melody for the words "Goodbye, goodbye, we'll meet again next week". You could choose an instrument to pass round the group, and sing a verse directed at each individual as their turn comes around.
- If your group members are verbal, you could go around the group and ask each what their favourite instrument or song was.



## Choosing

### **Aims:**

- To practice choosing skills
- To encourage listening, attention and waiting
- To encourage the exploration of sound
- To build confidence
- To give an opportunity to 'speak' and be heard.

Having the opportunity to make choices feeds into our confidence and sense of autonomy, and what we choose is a form of self-expression. It is the same for those we work with.

Sometimes we need to be creative in the ways we enable participants to make choices, particularly for non-verbal individuals. For example, someone might indicate their preference with their eyes or facial expressions. When choosing instruments, sometimes it helps to hear the sound of the instrument first, played by the session leader. Some may also respond well to picture cards, representing instruments or songs.

**Tip:** If someone finds choice making really difficult, or seems stuck in always making the same choice, you could make a lucky dip box, either of the instruments themselves or of picture cards. In this case, do give the participant the option to pick again if they don't like what they've selected.

Individuals will be able to cope with different levels of choice. Someone may only be able to make a choice between two instruments, which is something that might be built upon so in the future they can make a choice between three or more. Others can handle choosing from a larger selection, although they might become over-excited and distracted if too many are available.

**Tip:** You may wish to contain instruments within a box or on a particular table, to help a free choice be less overwhelming.

Once you have thought about how the people you are working with can manage choosing, you can use the following formats to practise these skills. You may wish to use these as starting points for other activities that use instruments.

### **1) One by One**

This activity makes a song out of the process of choosing instruments.

As the leader, start playing your own instrument and sing *“I’ve got a [instrument] and it sounds like this”*.

Pause and invite the first group member to choose their instrument, by whichever method feels most appropriate as described above.

Add them into the music, changing your song to reflect this; *“I’ve got a [instrument], [Name] has a [instrument] and it sounds like this”*.

Continue until all group members have an instrument.

**Tip:** It’s important that you stop playing while each group member chooses, so they do not feel pressured to choose quickly. Give lots of time to make their choice, and if they’re really struggling you could simplify it to a lucky dip of instruments.

## 2) Show Us How to Play

Everyone has a similar instrument. Everyone plays together in time – you could accompany this with a sung melody. Stop everyone playing by counting down – e.g. *“ready to stop in 3, 2, 1”* and then ask a group member a closed question regarding how the group should play – for example, loud or quiet, fast or slow, holding the instrument high or low, etc. Count everyone in to play again in this new style, before repeating with each group member with a new question each time.

## 3) What Do You Want to Play?

Everyone sits in a circle with three contrasting instruments in the middle – for example, a drum, a melodic instrument such as xylophone, and a smaller instrument like a tambourine. A steady rhythmic pulse is established by people patting their knees. Make sure everyone is patting their knees in time with each other before moving on.

In time with the knee pats sing *“What does [name] want to play?”* The group member then chooses one of the instruments to play. When the group member starts playing, the knee-pats continue and the group supports their playing.

After the group member has finished their turn, they put the instrument back in the middle (if necessary, the leader can prompt the group member to stop by singing *“And now get ready to stop”*). The knee pats continue, and then another member of the group is invited to play.

## Passing Instruments

### **Aims:**

- To build peer relationships, awareness of others and working as a group
- To develop motor skills and co-ordination
- To develop concentration, attention and ability to follow instructions
- To encourage sharing and social skills

Interacting with objects and with other people is something we all do without thinking about it, but nevertheless can be tricky for some people with learning disabilities. Musical activities that incorporate an element of passing things between people can be useful for practising these skills.

### **1) All Change!**

All the group members are invited to choose an instrument and to play it when the leader is playing their own instrument – a steady pulse on a drum will work well. After a short while, count down 3, 2, 1 and stop. Everyone (except the leader who retains the same instrument throughout) is asked to pass their instrument to the person on their right, and receive an instrument from the person on their left. The leader starts the steady pulse again and everyone plays their new instrument. If the group is small enough, this can be repeated until everyone has tried every instrument.

### **2) Hot Potato**

An instrument is passed around the group, whilst music is played (either recorded, or improvised by the leader). When the music stops, the person holding the instrument plays a short solo.

### **3) Passing Solos**

An instrument is passed around the group, with each member playing freely before passing it on. This is accompanied by the leader singing or playing music.

**Tip:** You can vary this by having two or three instruments being passed around, so participants get the chance to play duets or trios in different combinations.

## Turn-Taking Activities

### **Aims:**

- To practice turn-taking and sharing attention
- To improve eye contact, motor skills and coordination
- To develop concentration and self-control
- To encourage group co-ordination
- To encourage listening, waiting and anticipation

Many of the activities in this resource pack will require turn-taking to some extent, which can be difficult for some individuals. This section is dedicated to structured, short activities, which allow the session leader to focus on one group member at a time and have practising turn-taking as a specific aim.

### **1) Tambourine Song**

The group sits in a circle. The leader positions themselves so that they will be able to reach each group member easily; sitting slightly forward for a small group, or standing in the middle for a larger group. Choose a melody or song to sing as an accompaniment; you could choose a familiar tune, or make up a melody for the words *“I’ve got a song on the tambourine, oh yes I have, oh yes I have”*.

The leader alternates tapping the tambourine once themselves with offering it out for a group member to tap on it once (with the leader keeping hold of the instrument). Make sure to sing the melody in time with the tambourine hits; this will mean being very flexible and will likely result in some long pauses.

**Tip:** Offer the tambourine to other staff members in the group as well as participants, so they can model how the game should be played.

**Tip:** Switch up the order of who you offer the tambourine to keep everyone on their toes! You can be playful, too, if appropriate for your group – offer it to someone several times, or jokingly move it away as someone goes to tap it. Humour is a great tool for group bonding!

**Tip:** You can develop this into a leadership game by inviting group members to take the tambourine and offer it round themselves. In this circumstance, you should keep

singing the accompaniment yourself, inserting the name of the individual if you are using lyrics containing names.

## 2) *Can You Beat the Drum?*

This activity uses one drum – ideally a medium sized African-style drum - which the leader keeps hold of. The leader sings or chants a refrain based around the words “Who can beat upon the drum? [Name] can!” The leader will then hold the drum out for the named individual, and provide a vocal accompaniment for their playing. The other group members are invited to wait and listen. After a short while, return to the refrain, and repeat until each group member has had a turn.

## 3) *Pass the Sound*

Each group member has their own percussion instrument. The more similar the instruments are to each other, the better e.g. all instruments that are played by shaking. This game also works well with body percussion, such as clapping hands or stamping feet.

Each group member is invited to play their instrument briefly in turn, passing the sound round the circle. Some individuals might find it difficult to hold their instrument or to be asked to wait for play; if this is the case, acknowledge their excitement to play and encourage them to wait for their turn. You could try instead having one instrument passed around, or using instruments that are played with a beater and having one beater which is passed around instead.

**Tip:** If the individuals are able to do so, you could vary this activity by having a specific rhythm passed around the group; this could be as simple as playing a specified number of beats.

**Tip:** You could also invent a signal to change direction, or encourage the sound to be passed across the group via eye contact or gestures, rather than always going to the person next to you.

## Playing with Contrasts

### **Aims:**

- To encourage concentration and listening
- To play together as a group
- To develop auditory discrimination
- To release energy and have fun
- To encourage self-control and regulation

Music offers us the opportunity to experience a range of different contrasts; fast/slow, loud/quiet, sound/silence... Purposeful use of these can provide a rich musical experience for your participants, help them to practice other skills involved in group work – and have some fun too!

These activities are particularly effective in a group where there is a mix of abilities. All group members will get a sense of the changing feel of the music, even if it is difficult for them to understand the instructions. The staff members in the group, by carefully co-ordinating their playing and emphasising the chosen style, can make the changes in the music most effective.

### **1) *Soft-Loud-Soft, Slow-Fast-Slow***

Each group member has an instrument. The leader invites the group to play together, starting very quietly then getting gradually louder, before getting quieter again. The leader can encourage the group's playing by indicating through gesture and their own playing that the music is changing, for example by using larger and larger gestures, or starting with their hands held low down and gradually raising them up.

**Tip:** Instead of saying that the volume will go up and down, or the speed will change, you could instead ask the group to imagine going on a journey; for example going up a mountain, or along a river, or to imagine the sound of an approaching storm and asking them to play this. It might be effective to incorporate vocal sounds as well to reflect the changes you are asking for.

## 2) Go Freeze

Everyone chooses a musical instrument. When the leader says “GO!”, everyone starts playing as loud and fast as they can – it should sound a bit cacophonous! When the leader shouts “FREEZE!” everyone stops immediately. This can be repeated a few more times. There can be an element of playfulness; vary how quickly you start and stop the playing.

**Tip:** You can incorporate an element of leadership into this game by inviting other group members to take over shouting the commands. This can be developed further by sharing roles between different group members – having one person assigned to say “go” and another to say “freeze” – or even making it a free for all so anyone can jump in at any point!

**Tip:** Whoever has to shout “freeze” requires some volume and confidence, so be sure to encourage this.

**Tip:** A non-verbal participant could lead this activity by encouraging everyone to watch them closely and play only when they play.

## 3) Play the Emotion

Group members can choose an emotion that they would like to express musically as a group or as an individual. This could then be turned into a guessing game – what emotion were they playing?

**Tip:** It might be helpful to have picture cards with different faces to aid the choosing and guessing of the emotion.

## Leadership Games

### **Aims:**

- Increasing self-confidence, particularly when leading the group
- Playing as part of a group
- To experience being - and following - a leader

- To develop attention and listening skills

These activities give everyone the opportunity to be a leader and control what is happening, something that encourages self-confidence, whether or not they have a natural affinity towards leadership roles. Additionally, seeing and hearing others following your lead gives a concrete experience of your potential to influence others and the impact that your behaviour can have on other people. You may also find that more shy individuals try playing louder and more confidently when following a leader who plays louder.

In any of the following activities, individuals can be invited to be the leader. Always offer every member of a group a turn, but if an individual decides they don't want to take a turn as the leader, do respect this decision.

### *1) Follow the Leader*

Each group member chooses an instrument. The session leader starts to play and the group are invited to join in, matching the way he/she is playing. For example, if the leader is striking their instrument loudly, the group tries to match this sound on their instruments. If the leader softly shakes their instrument, then again the group listens carefully and matches this sound on their instruments.

Voices and physical movements could be used for this activity in place of musical instruments. All group members can then be offered a turn in the leader role. This activity can also be done in pairs, with the rest of the group watching as the designated leader and follower play together.

**Tip:** It is possible that a session participant might find the experience of being copied closely by others when they are leading this activity disconcerting. Or they may not realise others are trying to copy them, or like it when they do. Be ready to step in and support the 'leader' as necessary.



## 2) Conducting

Ask for a volunteer, or choose a person from the group, to be the conductor. Ask the rest of the group to each choose an instrument from the selection of instruments you have made available. Ask the music-makers to sit in a big circle around the conductor who is standing. The conductor demonstrates clear hand signals to direct their playing. For example: Open hands towards the group = starting; Closed hands = stopping; Arms up = loud; and Arms down = soft. Once these signals have been understood by all of the music makers then the conductor can start the music. Different group members can then have a turn as the leader.

**Tip:** Keep the hand signals simple, and only include as many signals as will be manageable for your group – it may only be one or two.

## 3) Copy Me/Catch Me Out

These are two similar games.

In '**Copy Me**,' one person claps a rhythm and the rest of the group copy in unison. This may require some counting in, or using a pulse by a drum beat, or stamping feet. This takes place with the group standing or sitting in a circle, and leadership passes round the circle with each turn.

'**Catch Me Out**' is similar, except that a particular rhythm is chosen in advance which, when heard, must **not** be copied. The aim is to try and catch people out!

## Musical Conversations

### **Aims:**

- Awareness of, and interaction with, other group members
- Opportunity for non-verbal interaction
- To develop social skills: turn-taking, sharing, eye-contact, listening
- To develop self-confidence and self-esteem

Some of the people we work with find language difficult to use in a meaningful way. Some find it hard to be understood. Some can't stop talking! For all such individuals, activities which explore non-verbal communication using music can give them opportunities to practise skills we all use to make contact with other people and build relationships. The process of doing this successfully can boost self-confidence and self-esteem.

### *1) Using Large Instruments (e.g. gathering drum, xylophone):*

Two group members – or one participant and the session leader - share an instrument in the middle of the circle and have a musical 'conversation', taking turns to play to each other and listening carefully to what their partner is 'saying'. The rest of the group are invited to be an audience for this duet.

Depending on the size of the group, you may wish to repeat this until all group members have been part of the duet. Structure could be added, deciding beforehand what the conversation might be (e.g. an argument, an excited exchange).

**Tip:** This format can also be used with separate, smaller instruments, although the dynamic of the interaction will change when sharing is removed from the equation.

### *2) Look and Play*

Each group member chooses an instrument. The session leader invites each group member in turn to have a 'conversation' with them via eye-contact. When the leader looks at another group member it is time for them to have a turn. This continues until everyone has had a conversation with the 'leader'.

**Tip:** When working with a more able group, you could try inviting one of the participants to be the leader and to start and stop musical conversations with other group members.

### *3) Bongo Conversations*

The group sits in a circle. The leader plays the bongos and invites the person on their right to play together. When the pair is finished playing, the bongos are passed to the right and a new pair starts to play. Continue until all the participants have played the bongos.

## Improvisation

### **Aims:**

- To encourage free self-expression and creativity
- To allow each member to experience themselves as part of a group, with the potential to see that their behaviour (for example: how they play an instrument) can impact others
- Provides the group leader with an opportunity to observe the way the members are within a group and how they relate to each other. This can be an indication of how they relate to others in general
- To promote listening skills, group awareness and attention

The majority of activities in this booklet incorporate an element of musical improvisation. This section focuses specifically on using improvisation as an activity in itself. It may also inform how you approach the opportunities for improvised music-making within other activities.

**Be prepared for a certain level of chaos during a free improvisation!** However, it is important to allow the group members this space to be expressive in their music. Improvisation offers an opportunity for being truly in the moment; to be spontaneous, playful and have fun. It offers a space for self-expression and encourages group members to become more aware of one another.

Playing music freely can help improve self-esteem, increase self-confidence and gain a deeper sense of trust between group members. Free improvisation is a good indicator as to how the group are working together: Are they listening to one another? How are they responding to each other's musical ideas?

The development of this sense of group can lead to an increased tolerance and acceptance of each other. Hopefully your group member will be able to transfer their experience of this in the music session to subsequent social situations.

### **1) Free Improvisation**

It can be interesting and fun to offer the opportunity to explore musical instruments freely and to play without having to think about 'rules'. Group improvisation offers this and involves all the group members and the leader in simultaneously and spontaneously making music.

Invite all the group members to choose an instrument. When everyone is ready, encourage everyone to play however they would like. The music leader can use an instrument to provide musical structure, for example a deep drum to hold a steady beat, or a xylophone to provide a simple repeating tune. You can also structure the start by asking everyone to start playing one by one; one person will start, then the person to their right will join in after a few moments, continuing around the circle until everyone is playing.

**Tip:** Take the opportunity to observe how the group is working together. Are they listening to one another? Do you see any evidence that they are responding to each other's musical ideas, maybe copying volume or intensity of play?

**Tip:** You too are an active participant. Don't just sit back and watch. Join in!

**Tip:** You can use your playing to support and encourage, non-verbally, someone who is withdrawn.

**Tip:** Playing alongside an individual who has become totally absorbed in playing at an extreme volume – matching their exuberance or playfully trying to catch their eye – can make them aware once more of the other people around.

**Tips:** It can be good to ask everyone to demonstrate what sound their instrument makes in turn before starting the music.

## 2) *One-to-One Improvisation*

Take it in turns to engage in free improvisation with each individual. Before you start to play, focus on the person and wait to see what they do. Your music-making should be offered in response to this. Responding means acknowledging whatever it is they do. It may be only one tiny beat. By waiting sensitively and responding to it in a similar gentle manner, what that person has said musically is given importance and he/she has more chance of realising or feeling that he/she has been listened to and given your full attention.

Use your intuition to judge how long you should spend with each member. If there is little or no response from the person, try not to cut them short for fear of giving the impression of being not interested or not satisfied with he/she has done. Someone who remains silent can be softly sung to, using their name in a manner that suggests that you are simply present with them, rather than a manner that might suggest that there is something you want them to do.

### 3) Themed Improvisation

Using a theme can bring a sense of purpose and structure to an improvisation. Either the group leader or the group members decide upon a theme (e.g. a season, a thunderstorm, a particular scene) and create this musically using free improvisation. This can be done in pairs, small groups or by the whole group together. The activity can be developed by splitting the group into two and selecting contrasting themes for them to play.

**Tip:** If allocated secretly, one group could guess which theme the other group plays.

## Using the Voice

### **Aims:**

- To encourage purposeful use of the voice
- To promote active participation and listening
- To build self- confidence
- To provide a group bonding experience
- To provide opportunities for making choices

Regardless of whether or not we are verbal or non-verbal, our voices are a crucial part of how we communicate with others and how we express ourselves. These activities encourage our participants to use their voice in creative, communicative and expressive ways.

Some use familiar songs, which are also a great resource for use in your interactive music-making groups. These are songs with which you will already be very familiar and which you should be confident to sing with your group. They could be pop songs, traditional or folk songs from your region, songs used in favourite films, or old classics.

Using songs provides us with a wide range of vocal, communication and auditory experiences and are a great source of activities that can be used flexibly to achieve different aims.

### ***1) Humming***

The leader invites the group to hum softly, on any note. By using gestures, the leader indicates by gesture for the group to get louder and quieter, and/or to go up and down in pitch; low rumbling to high squeaking.

You can move from humming to other sounds; 'ahhh', hissing, buzzing. You can ask the group members to choose the sound, and invite them to lead the sounds.

This activity can provide a good warm-up before singing songs. Using sounds that are not words is one way of working towards speech in pre-, non- or minimally verbal people. Experimenting with verbal sounds in this more 'free' way can be less intimidating than singing.

### ***2) Passing a Microphone***

Everyone takes turns to make a short silly sound through a microphone before passing it on to the next person. Be ready to accept whatever sound someone makes – even if it's just breathing into the microphone and hearing what that sounds like when amplified.

Encourage creativity; you may wish to send the microphone round the group 3 times and ask everyone to make a different sound each time.

### ***3) Singing Songs***

Invite the group members to suggest songs they would like to sing as a group. It is good for the music leaders to be able to sing the song choices confidently to ensure the song will be well supported, so you may wish to present a limited choice of songs you feel confident to sing in the moment, and take requests to learn for the next session. You may wish to print out lyric sheets.

You could also prepare picture cards representing different songs to help non-verbal group members choose songs. Sometimes children's songs may be suggested; you will have to decide in each case whether the song should be avoided in an adult group, or if it is more important to acknowledge the choice of the individual who made the request.

You may need to come prepared with some ideas at first. If any entertainers come into your setting and sing songs that seem popular with service users, these too could be added to your list. You could also think about any TV shows or films that are popular with the group, and songs they may recognise from those.

Find ways to make the songs you choose interactive. For example, you can pause at the end of a phrase to encourage group members to fill in the gap with the missing word, or you could build in instrumental solos for each group member.

Here are some songs that work well using this technique:

- **'We Will Rock You'** by Queen – give each group member the chance to fill in the words “rock you” on their own. Encourage doing the actions along with the song.
- **'500 Miles'** by The Proclaimers – the “da da da” sections works great as a back and forth between leader and group members! Indicate with gestures who should sing at each point.
- **'Three Little Birds'** by Bob Marley – the simple structure and pace is ideal for incorporating instrumentals. Sing the verse and chorus, then leave space for a group member to play an instrumental solo before starting again and repeating until everyone has had a go.

**Tip:** Having instruments to play at the same time as singing can feel less intimidating, and is a way of including those group members who can't, or don't wish to sing.

**Tip:** Be aware of your pacing; you may need to sing the song slower than you usually would, or leave gaps for everyone to catch up. You may also want to shorten the song by skipping a section to make it more manageable for someone with a shorter attention span.

## Getting Moving!

**Aims:**

- To bring awareness of one's self in relation to the group (social awareness)
- To practice visual awareness and listening skills
- To develop motor skills, body awareness and physical co-ordination
- To increase self-esteem and self- confidence

- To encourage physical activity and release energy

Physical co-ordination and managing physical energy can be difficult for some adults with learning di. These activities use music and sound as a motivator and to provide structure for practising awareness and control over our bodies.

### 1) *Stretching*

This can also be a good warm up to start off a session. Guide the group through a variety of stretches, such as reaching up tall or stretching out to the side. You can use your voice to guide the pace of the movement – for example, when stretching up, accompanying this by singing along slowly ascending note, reaching the highest pitch when everyone should be at the peak of their stretch.

### 2) *Follow the Leader*

Choose some upbeat pre-recorded music that the group could dance to. A leader is chosen and the rest of the group copies their actions. This can be done with or without instruments. You may wish to encourage everyone to dance as they wish before starting this activity, to give an opportunity to get some ideas before being put on the spot.

### 3) *Dance and Stop!*

**a)** Use recorded music, or play a loud steady drum beat. When the music plays everyone dances. When the music stops, everyone must stand as still as possible and be very silent. See how long the group can stay silent. You can do this activity while playing instruments as well.

**Tip:** If participants are unable or reluctant to move around the room, they can still join in by moving parts of their body whilst seated (e.g. wiggling their fingers, tapping their feet etc).

**b)** While using recorded music, everybody chooses an instrument and plays whilst dancing to the music. When the music stops, everybody turns to the person nearest to them and plays together for a short while. When the music begins again, the pairs exchange instruments and repeat.

### 4) *Body Percussion*



The group leader should plan a rhythmic repeated pattern using clapping hands, tapping the knees/chest, stamping feet, pointing/waving into the air. You will then teach this to the group, step by step, until everyone is trying to play together. The pattern can be made as simple or complex as is appropriate for the group. It should be simple enough that most group members are able to do it after a few tries, but still challenging enough so that everyone needs to concentrate. You could also incorporate vocal sounds or instruments into the pattern.

**Tip:** To start with, you could use a clap – clap and point upwards with both hands, like that used in Queen’s ‘We Will Rock You.’ When the group can manage a pattern of two different movements, try adding a third, e.g. two stamps of the feet.

## Contact and Resources

UK charity *Music as Therapy International* is committed to sharing the unique and life enhancing benefits of music therapy around the UK and worldwide. If you would like further support or training, please get in touch at [info@musicastherapy.org](mailto:info@musicastherapy.org) or on 020 7735 3231.

## Suggested further reading

*Creative Music in Groupwork (Creative Activities in Groupwork)* (1997) by Chris Achenbach

*Group Music Activities for Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* (2011) by Maria Ramey

*Groups in Music: Strategies from Music Therapy* (2003) by Mercédès Pavlicevic

*Pied Piper: Musical activities to develop basic skills* (2001) by Oldfield and Bean  
(This book is primarily aimed at children but has a wealth of activities that can be adapted

# Notes and Ideas

# Notes and Ideas

# Appendix 1: The Role of Music for Adults with Learning Difficulties

## THE ROLE OF MUSIC FOR ADULTS WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES: THE EVIDENCE BASE

Supporting Health and Social Care Professionals Across the UK



Outlining the research which underpins the evidence for music therapy as a psychosocial intervention for adults with learning disabilities, aligned with the UK Government's Transforming Care programme; giving us confidence that engaging carers in music based interventions can help them to better understand those in their care.

“ [For] people with learning disabilities... making music can mean much more than simply playing an instrument, it's about freedom, expression, aspiration and achievement. ”

Music and Adults with Learning Disabilities, Mencap



## The Music Therapy Evidence Base

Music therapy can be very helpful for those with learning disabilities and often focuses on the use of music as a means of communication, self-expression and interaction.

Notably, the majority of research studies evidencing the value of music therapy for people with learning disabilities focuses on children and special education. Whilst research into the role of music therapy for adults with learning disabilities does exist, this population is under-represented in the current evidence. Despite these limitations, there are examples that demonstrate the value of music therapy for those with learning disabilities:

- Developing communication, social and interpersonal skills and building relationships
- Emotional development and self-expression
- Addressing isolation non-verbally, by encouraging interaction and diffusing stress associated with interacting
- Reducing anxiety and agitation
- Contributing to, maintaining or rehabilitating functional cognitive and sensory abilities
- Increasing self-confidence and self-esteem, acceptance and success
- The expression of preferences and promotion of choice-making
- Enhancing hand-eye co-ordination and gross/fine motor skills

*References: Aldridge et al (1995); Boxhill, E. H. (1984); Bunt, L. (1994); Bunt, L. & Hoskyns, S. (2002); Chester, K. et al (1999); Curtis & Mercado (2004); Daveson & Edwards (1998); Dorothea (2012); Fragkouli (2013); Gantt (2000); Gold et al (2004); Halck (2004); Hooper & Lindsay (1990); Hooper & Lindsay (1992); Hooper (2001); Hooper et al (2011); Jellison (2000); Lee & McFerran (2012); Loewy (2000); Magee & Bowen (2008); Meadows (1997); Montello & Coons (1999); Nicholls (2002); Nordoff & Robbins (1977); Ockelford et al (2002); Pavlicevic et al (2013); Sacks (1995); Stalker (1998); Toolan & Coleman (1994); Watson (2007); Wigram (1993); Wigram (2000); Wilson (1991).*



“ Music can change the way we care. ”

Partner at The Fields Specialist Residential Home, Sheffield

## The Current Health and Social Care Framework

NHS England's *Transforming Care Programme* instructs providers to create 'capable environments' for people with learning disabilities. The table aligns some of the benefits recorded after *Music as Therapy International* projects for adults with learning disabilities, with *Transforming Care's* recommendations:

<i>Transforming Care</i> recommendations	Benefits from music sessions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive social interactions</li> <li>• Support to establish and maintain relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Non-verbal communication</li> <li>• Turn-taking</li> <li>• Self-regulation</li> <li>• Emotional expression</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for meaningful activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation</li> <li>• Enjoyment</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunities for choice</li> <li>• Encouragement of greater independence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiating activities/interaction</li> <li>• Taking the lead</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support to establish and maintain relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduced isolation</li> <li>• Social motivation</li> <li>• Improved relationships with staff and peers</li> </ul>

*Transforming Care* also recommends "mindful and skilled family/carers and paid support/care staff", which is where the work of *Music as Therapy International* has a major contribution to make.

## Music as Therapy International's Approach

*Music as Therapy International* has been delivering skill-sharing projects internationally for over twenty years. We have been working with vulnerable people in the UK in 2016, and our approach has been shortlisted for an *Advancing Healthcare Award*.

Providing introductory training to practitioners working with people with learning difficulties is important to us – especially the often neglected Adults with Learning Difficulties (ALD) which is one of our three prioritised client groups.

Drawing on the core principles of music therapy, we provide training to staff working in care settings, equipping them with new techniques to support residents on a day-to-day basis and to enhance person-centred care. This is by way of targeted musical activities which allow service users to advance toward social and emotional goals, while enhancing the quality of relationships between all participants.

The evidence overleaf illustrates the benefits of music for adults with learning disabilities and the difference our training has made for those who care for them.

## Quantitative Evidence from our UK Partners

In the context of the care of adults with learning disabilities, 100% of the practitioners and managers we have worked with told us that participation in music sessions had benefitted service users:

- Non-verbal communication
- Initiating activities/interaction
- Turn-taking
- Enjoyment
- Participation

When we looked across the lifespan, our partners told us that the following benefits were particularly prevalent for adults with learning disabilities:

- Taking the lead
- Self-regulation
- Emotional expression



Reference: *Music as Therapy International, UK Sustainability Review Report (2018)*

## Qualitative Evidence from our ALD Partners

“ Our music as therapy Friday afternoon group sessions are now firmly embedded in our timetable. We have non service users attending with their own support workers. By doing so, these people are no longer isolated and are participating in meaningful activities alongside peers. ”

**Manager**

“ What I get out of it is I'm really really good at listening... [and I] get to pick songs sometimes. ”

**Participant with learning disabilities**

“ It broadens your mind a little bit, it makes you realise that communication isn't a one way street and it doesn't have to be verbal... Each of these people has a very unique way of getting their feelings across to you and if you can just find a way for them to have an opportunity to do so then it opens up a whole other area for them. ”

**Practitioner**

“ The structure of the sessions has provided the mechanisms for those who often don't participate well in groups (by choice or by situation) to contribute and join others. Two of the adults can display challenging behaviour when in group settings, but during the music sessions this has moderated appreciably. ”

**Practitioner**

To find out more about meaningful music for your service users or to discuss training for your staff, please contact:

freyagibbs@musicastherapy.org  
020 7735 3231

  musicastherapy  
www.musicastherapy.org

