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Music Therapy and Autism

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Growing up, I never heard of autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or what it was until the time my younger brother was diagnosed. Not knowing what it was, I did my research and only read about more severe cases. I automatically assumed the worst and wasn't sure what to expect. It wasn't until his specialist recommended something that we had never heard of that my thinking changed. He was enrolled in a school with other students that were also on the autism spectrum that would teach him things he would learn at a "normal" pre-K class. As time went on, he began to learn basically everything, both involving educational material (math, physical education, etc.) and how to do normal everyday things (cleaning, getting ready for school, bedtime). Surprisingly, the school taught him all of these things through music in some way or another.

Autism

Autism, named after the Greek word for *self*, is a neurodevelopmental disorder (Dimitriadis & Smeijsters). Every person that is diagnosed with autism will show different signs of ASD making it easier or a bit harder to diagnose since not all cases are the same. The advocacy organization Autism Speaks lists some early signs of autism: limited or no eye contact by 6 months; little or no babbling, little or no back-and-forth gestures like pointing, waving, or reaching by 12 months; and very few or no words at all by 16 months old ("Learn the Signs of Autism"). Not only are there skill development delays that are signs of a child having ASD, but there also are some restrictive/repetitive behaviors or interests that help diagnose ASD. The CDC lists some of these behaviors as getting upset at minor changes, having a certain routine to follow, or having unusual reactions to the way things sound, smell, taste, look, or feel.

While these signs suggest the possibilities of ASD, It is important for parents to have their child diagnosed with a professional before assuming a diagnosis. Some children go through life undiagnosed and face challenges later in life professionally, academically, and mentally. The most common challenges usually center around anxiety, which can be expressed through meltdowns, obsessive compulsive behavior, or how they struggle with transition or change happening around them. Unlike an average person who may be experiencing anxiety, research shows that “people with autism experience elevated levels of anxiety in comparison to their typically developing peers” (“Common Challenges”). These elevated levels are what set the autism community apart, which in turn makes their overall learning experience more strenuous compared to other students within the education system.

Autism Spectrum Levels

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition, text revision* (DSM-5-TR) outlines diagnostic criteria based on functioning in two domains: social communication and restricted interest/repeating behaviors. With a diagnosis, autistic individuals can gain support based on their needs. Some individuals are able to hold a normal conversation but may need help with social cues or needing someone to talk to such as a therapist. Some individuals with autism get upset at obstacles socially or functionally if they’re not experienced in similar situations or without someone there to help them with this change. Then there are individuals who are non-speaking who are highly sensitive and can’t communicate emotionally or verbally. The only way they feel they can communicate is by having outbursts of emotion when their needs aren’t met. Though this doesn’t seem like an ideal situation, this is how they feel they can communicate how they’re feeling.

When diagnosing a child with autism, there are different levels in which they are placed to determine how much attention they require and the assistance they would need. There are three different levels, and each has their own plan for each child. The first level of autism does require the least amount of support since those with this level of diagnosis are the higher functioning amongst the spectrum. Level 1 autistic individuals have some trouble understanding or complying with social conventions, need personal organization strategies, and can stress during transitions. Change can already be a scary situation, but children with autism can have a negative reaction especially if they're not coached prior to the change. Level 2 autistic children have very similar characteristics to level 1 children but somewhat greater difficulties. These children use fewer words or have different speech patterns, show strange social behaviors like walking away during conversation or not responding, demonstrate a high interest in a specific topic, and experience distress when having to deal with change in a more noticeable way. Level 2 autistic individuals need more accommodations in school to help with the challenges that they face with school work assignments. The final level of autism needs the most assistance when it comes to support. Children that are diagnosed with Level 3 autism are usually non-speaking, prefer to be alone, have little to no interest in making friends, and show extreme distress when asked to change areas of concentration or focus. Children at this level need more individual attention since their behavior doesn't usually make it easy to interact with others. Though each level has their own special characteristics, each child needs the support that they can get in order to help them achieve everyday things. Some children in each level have benefited from music therapies in one form or another. Music therapy has proven in many cases to help the child succeed not only with development, but also with other skills for their everyday lives.

Benefits of Music Therapy for Autistic Children

Along with the three autism spectrum levels, communication continues to play a huge role in the way autistic children develop their social skills. Without the stressors of expressing emotions or building wholesome relationships, music allows the opportunity for a less demanding way of communication. One example would be lyrics that focus on instruction or tasks that a child can follow. A song about brushing one's teeth or even tying a shoe is a simple, yet effective way for a child to learn and develop new skills and abilities (LaGasse). Memorizing and repeating simple songs makes communicating more feasible, giving them another option other than mastering speech (Harkla).

According to the American Music Therapy Association, music therapy is defined as “the clinical & 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.” Those who complete a degree in this profession also oversee the cognitive, emotional, and motor/sensory within each individual, ensuring that each examination is specific to the child’s preferences and or abilities (*Music Therapy as a Treatment Modality for Autism Spectrum Disorders*).

In addition to a child's independent progress, the relationship between the parent and child is also increased through music therapy, creating more intimacy and understanding between the two. Since this method of therapy calms the minds of the children, parents and caregivers are able to witness growth through self-expression and confidence. With reduced levels of anxiety, aggression and tension, studies have been able to connect these improvements to neuroscience “where hearing and motor functions are controlled in the same parts of the brain” (Harkla). This

proves that this treatment helps train the children to isolate specific stimuli needed to vocalize their words.

Preparing for a Music Session for ASD

When a music therapy session is being prepared for the child, it is important to first be familiar with the student's background. This means by the music therapist first reading the child's Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) and their 504 plan. An IEP and 504 plan are similar, but also different. An IEP is a map, or "plan," that includes special education instruction, support, and the services the child needs to be successful in their school. IEPs are protected by a special education law called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). These were made for special needs children who qualify for these services in public and charter schools. There are many positives to having an IEP because, on each IEP, the child is evaluated to see what their strengths and weaknesses are in order to help. Just like an IEP, a 504 plan gives the child special support, accommodations, and additional services in school. The one difference is the 504 plan isn't a part of special education, instead it serves a different purpose. A 504 plan is a plan for how the child's school will support and remove any obstacles that they may face with any disabilities. Similar to an IEP, a 504 plan is protected by a law. Unlike an IEP, a 504 plan has less requirements in order for a child to qualify. The child can have any type of learning disability and have a wide range of struggles that prevents them from learning in a general education classroom.

One thing that can help music therapists learn about each individual child is by keeping notes of their strengths and weaknesses to see what should be worked on at every session. This information can be useful not only for the therapist, but also for the child's family and other

important personnel that are involved with the child's IEP meetings. Having a record of the student's progress is an important key when also continuing the planning of each session. Since autistic children have sensory sensitivities and music can use multiple senses, it would be beneficial to the child's lessons to be formatted to their specific needs. Some children are more sensitive to certain sounds or touches that can be triggering. By following the child's IEP, the therapist will have a better understanding of how to plan the child's sessions so that it runs smoothly and puts the child in a comfortable position.

Options for formatting these lessons to address specific sensitivities can be categorized based on impact within the three music senses, which are motor movements, auditory skills, and visual abilities. Some children with autism have some impairments in their fine motor skills, which can include moving their finger, or also their balance and coordination. Though these seem like small problems, depending on the level the child was diagnosed with, these simple tasks can be very challenging. Clapping along with a song or walking to the beat of the music are just some examples of synchronizing the body in this way, promoting motor coordination in children. Hearing the beat of the song and being able to match the timing of the beat takes listening and concentration for the child. Another example would be tapping rhythm sticks together with a partner which requires refined coordination and can be fun for the child. Making simple skills fun for the child can help motivate them to work on their motor skills.

Conclusion

Seeing how music therapy is beneficial to autistic children with social skills, communication, and other skill sets needed to live every day shows that nothing is impossible especially with the power of music. Music therapy has been proven in many different cases to

work for many children on any of the three levels of the autistic spectrum. Music therapists work very closely with the families and the school in order for the child to continue to improve based on their IEP.

Music therapy is what helped my brother achieve many things in his life, from learning everyday skills, to learning how to be more independent and social amongst his peers. Because he was able to receive the help he needed, this gave him the courage he needed to go out and audition for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade in 2022. During his time, he was able to play with other high school students coming from different backgrounds from all around the country. Making friends, collaborating on different music projects, and just making these types of memories is something that he may not have had the opportunity to do if he never received the help he got at a very young age. Music therapy is beneficial to autistic children, and if given the opportunity, autistic children and their families should experience the help and support this type of therapy can give not only to the child but also to the family.

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