

# *Music Therapy for Autistic Children*



Music can be incredibly powerful. It has been used to soothe, calm and refresh people for thousands of years. We have probably all experienced times where a piece of music has spoken to us or moved our emotions in a way that words or pictures alone would not have done.

Music can sometimes speak to us on a far deeper level than other methods of communication, and autistic people often have a particular affinity with music and find it enables them to express emotions that they may otherwise struggle with. So the use of music as a form of therapy for an autistic child makes perfect sense.

But what is music therapy, and is it worth considering it as an option for your autistic child?

How do you know if it will be helpful for your child? How does it work and what difference could it make to your child's life?

This resource aims to give an introduction to music therapy for autistic children, to answer the most common questions and to guide your first steps in trying music therapy for your autistic child.



## **What is music therapy?**

There is nothing secret or mysterious about music therapy. After a busy, stressful day, do you find it helpful to listen to some soothing, relaxing music? Or does music with a driving beat help you to exercise? Perhaps playing a musical instrument helps you to relax and unwind, or you enjoy creating music as part of a group of people playing together. Music therapy uses all these responses to music and many others like them to help people improve their wellbeing.

Music therapy is the use of both listening to and making music to help people thrive in areas of their lives where they may be struggling. The therapy can help with a whole range of issues which frequently arise in autistic children, including emotions, communication, social skills, motor and cognitive skills, self-confidence and many more. Just as music can take a whole range of forms, so music therapy is similarly wide-ranging, and it is not possible to say what a “typical” music therapy session would involve as there is no such thing – it is as individual as those receiving the therapy.

A good music therapist will identify the issues faced by the person they are working with and tailor a treatment plan to help them. It could be expressing their emotions through making freeform music, listening to soothing sounds, or using to music to communicate or to match movements amongst many other methods. The possibilities are endless.

## **How can music therapy benefit autistic children?**

There has been much research done on the benefits of music therapy to autistic children.

Some of the key findings are as follows:

- Music therapy may help to promote wellness by managing stress, enhancing memory, and improving communication

Individuals of all ages and all abilities can benefit from music therapy. Music therapy has been used to support emotional, cognitive, and social development in many populations.



Research found that music in interventions used with autistic children and teens can improve social behaviours, increase focus and attention, increase communication attempts, reduce anxiety, and improve body awareness and coordination.

Many additional studies have found that autistic children and adults respond well to music. Often, autistic individuals respond positively to music when little else can get their attention, which makes music a potentially powerful therapeutic tool.

- Music encourages social interactions

Research has found that autistic children showed more emotional expression and social engagement during music therapy sessions than in play sessions without music. These children also responded to the therapist's requests more frequently during music therapy than in play sessions without music.

Additionally, a skilled therapist can use music with children to increase their social interaction and improve social skills.

Passing and sharing instruments, music and movement games, gathering around a central instrument, learning to listen and singing of greetings are just a few of the ways music therapy sessions can increase interaction.

- Music can improve behaviour

In a study of 41 autistic children over a ten-month period, it was found that weekly music therapy sessions seemed to improve overall behaviour, with the most improvement seen in inattentive behaviours.

Children in this study experienced hour-long sessions of music therapy once a week, and their conduct was monitored against a checklist of target behaviour like restlessness, aggression, and noisiness. More than half the group improved by one or two points on the scale after the music therapy sessions.

You can read the full study published in Science Daily, by the UPM, and some really encouraging case studies of the different ways that music therapy has helped autistic children [here](#).

## How to find a music therapist for your child

It may well be that your child's teacher or a medical professional has recommended music therapy as an option for your child, and such professionals may well be able to recommend local music therapists who work with autistic children. Recommendations from other parents of autistic parents or local autism support groups may also help. The British Association for Music Therapy has a search tool on their website for finding a therapist.

As with all situations where you are choosing a professional to work with your child, it is well worth having a conversation with a therapist you are considering to talk through your child's needs and ask how the therapist may be able to help and what experience they have with other similar children. Don't be afraid to speak to a number of professionals before choosing a therapist.



## **How to introduce your child to music therapy**

The first thing a therapist will want to do is to make an assessment of your child and their needs for themselves. Of course they will want to know your thoughts and those of others, such as teachers, but it is important that they also see and assess your child in person before making any plans.

Before seeing the therapist for the first time, it is worth talking to your child in advance about what is going to happen and why. Many autistic people prefer to stick to known routines, so spending time with someone new may take some getting used to. Talking about it in advance gives your child time to think things through and ask questions. Present the session to your child as a time for having fun making and listening to music and other sounds rather than a medical appointment, which may have negative associations.

Speak to the therapist in advance about whether you can or should stay with your child for their first sessions. Nobody wants a child to be distressed, but equally it may be beneficial for your child to spend time with their therapist without you being there as they do at school.



This is something that needs to be worked out between you and the music therapy professional, and as with all relationships of this type, a mutually supportive and positive relationship between you and the therapist will be of most benefit to your child.

Once the therapist has had a chance to assess your child, they will draw up a therapy plan with goals, which they will share and discuss with you. This plan will be regularly evaluated, amended and updated as necessary to ensure that your child gets the maximum possible benefit. If you have any concerns, speak to the therapist in the same way that you would speak to your child's teacher if you had concerns about something at school. Equally, do let the therapist know of positive results from the therapy and anything from the sessions that your child seems to have particularly enjoyed or benefitted from.

