
The following entries were selected after searching four databases (PubMed, MedLine, PsychInfo, ERIC) for peer-reviewed articles. Any that were not in English, did not have a certified music therapist involved, or were general articles on different treatments were eliminated. This document is not intended to be an exhaustive list of research on the stated topic.


This study investigated the impact of interactive music therapy sessions on behaviors and musical skills of young adults with autism. Eight participants with severe autism completed 52 weekly active music therapy sessions lasting 60 minutes. Sessions included singing, piano playing, and drumming. Measures included the Clinical Global Impression (CGI) scale and the Brief Psychiatric Rating Scale (BPRS). Musical skills were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale indicating the level of presence. Results indicated significant improvements for the CGI and BPRS scales. Participants’ musical skills also significantly improved.


This single case experimental design study with a 3-year-old child with ASD demonstrated that music play sessions employing a variety of instruments, toys and “piggy back” songs with guitar increased the child’s social responsive behaviors (i.e., eye contact, imitation, and turn taking skills). In addition, the child exhibited no avoidance behaviors (e.g., looking away, walking away, or pushing away a toy or adult), during music therapy sessions.


In this Cochrane review, the authors identified three small randomized controlled or controlled clinical trials studies (N = 24) that met the criteria for inclusion in their meta-analysis for comparing music therapy to “placebo” therapy, no treatment, or standard care. Results indicated that music therapy was significantly more effective than the non-music therapy conditions for addressing verbal and gestural communicative skills, but did not have a significant effect on behavioral issues. The authors concluded that the studies did not offer great applicability to clinical situations due to the short-term effect of brief music therapy interventions (i.e., sessions conducted daily for only one week).

In this Cochrane review, the authors identified ten randomized controlled or controlled clinical trial studies (N = 165) that met inclusion criteria. Studies compared music therapy to placebo, no treatment or standard care for persons with ASD. Results indicated that music therapy was superior for the treatment of social interaction, non-verbal communicative skills, verbal communicative skills, initiating behavior, and social-emotional reciprocity. The authors concluded that this review provides evidence that music therapy may help children with ASD make improvements in these primary outcome areas.


The authors in this article discuss sensory and motor differences in persons with Autism. This extended profile of Autism is related to individual with rehabilitative needs who benefit from rhythmic and music interventions for motor functioning. The authors provide a rationale for how rhythm and music therapy can promote sensorimotor skills in persons with Autism, which may also impact cognitive, social, and communication skills.


Using an ABAB withdrawal design, this study evaluated how songs composed specifically for two 3-year-old boys with ASD could assist them during the morning greeting routine of their inclusive classrooms. The songs, composed by the music therapist, delineated each step of the morning greeting routine. Classroom teachers were taught to sing these songs, embedding them into the routine. Results indicated that the songs supported the children’s independent entering the classroom, greeting the teachers and/or peers, and engaging in play.


Ten boys between the ages of 3 and 5 took part in this randomized controlled trial single subject design comparing improvisational music therapy and play sessions with toys. Upon analysis of sessions, improvisational music therapy yielded significantly more and longer eye contact and turn-taking than did play sessions.


This article described emotional, motivational, and interpersonal responsiveness of 10 young children with ASD between the ages of 3 and 5 during music therapy improvisational music therapy. Results of this repeated measures within subjects comparison design indicated that improvisational music therapy produced significantly more and longer events of joyful facial expressions, emotional synchronicity, and initiation of engagement than did toy play conditions. Note: Though based on the same study as Kim, Wigram, & Gold (2008), this entry includes different outcome descriptions.


This article investigated the combined use of Music Therapy and Dance/Movement Therapy for the treatment of symptoms of autism in adults. Eight adults received one hour of the combined treatment for a total of 36 sessions over 17 weeks. When compared to a control group, the Music Therapy and Dance/Movement Therapy group showed greater improvements in symptoms of autism as measured by the Evaluation of Autistic Behavior.


This article presents a coding system monitoring of changes in relationship during music therapy sessions. Developed from a psychodynamic framework, the system includes four behavioral classes: Verbal Communication, Nonverbal Communication, Countenance, and Sonorous Musical Communication. The authors tested this system using videotapes of improvisational sessions. Seven children diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder participated in the study. The researchers found a high level of agreement between assessments by video raters.

This article describes music used in music therapy sessions for children with autism. Ninety-one music therapists responded to a national survey focused on songs used with children with autism. Respondents answered questions about song types, presentation styles, and song repertoire. Results indicated a greater use of live music over recorded music.


This study examined the effect of music-based social stories on comprehension and generalizability of social skills in children with autism. Thirty participants with autism were randomly assigned by cluster to one of six control or experimental groups. Participants were exposed daily to the music-based social story during their music therapy group time in a weeklong summer camp. Comprehension scores were collected before, during, and after the camp. Results indicated significant improvements in comprehension between pre and posttest. No other main effects were found. The researchers suggest using music-based social stories to promote comprehension.


The authors of this article review basic ideas of Neurodiversity and how community music therapy can be used to support this movement. One community music therapy effort highlighted is Sensory Friendly Concerts® (SFCs), a music enjoyment and making opportunity that also promotes the social acceptance of each individual. The authors discuss SFCs within the broader scope of community music and music therapy. They also present personal accounts and initial program data from individuals who attended SFCs.


This article presents a review of literature relating to nonverbal communication, autism, and music therapy. The author included a case study of a nonverbal woman with autism where her behaviors are interpreted contextually. The author described the therapeutic rapport, interactions, and communication that occurred in music therapy.


This review examines the evidence base for the use of music interventions for children with autism. Twenty articles met the study's inclusion criteria. The authors reported that composed songs and improvisational music therapy techniques were the most prominent in the literature. Furthermore, there was initial evidence to support the use of music interventions to facilitate social, communicative, and behavioral skills in young children with autism.


This study investigated the use of music to teach communication skills. In this single case design study, three children with ASD, ages 3 to 4 were taught a song about animal names while the animal symbols were simultaneously shown in a PowerPoint presentation on an Interactive Whiteboard (IWB). Children were asked to touch the symbol on the IWB that corresponded to the animal named in the song. Using the IWB facilitated correct receptive labeling by all the study participants, but generalization of learning to other contexts was not significant.


This study investigated the impact of family-centered music therapy (FCMT) to support social engagement between child and parent. The study included twenty-three children with severe ASD. Families received either 16 weeks of music therapy in addition to their early intervention programs or only their early intervention program. Change was measured with standardized parent-report assessments, parent interviews, and clinician observation. Results indicated that children who received FCMT significantly improved on the Vineland Social Emotional Early Childhood Scale. Qualitative analysis of the parent interviews indicated that the parent-child relationship was strengthened.

Vaiouli, P., Grimmet, K., & Ruich, L. J. (2015). “Bill is now singing”: Joint engagement and the emergence of

In this study a child-centered, improvisational, music therapy intervention was implemented to promote engagement in three children with autism. The children’s performance was compared using a multiple-baseline design. Data were collected through three phases of the intervention, including a focus on faces, response to joint attention, and initiation of joint attention. The authors also conducted a qualitative analysis of teacher and parent experiences in order to further understand the role of the social environment in supporting emergence of social communication skills. All three children showed improvement in joint attention and actions of social engagement. The authors suggest that this provides initial evidence for using music to promote social skills of young children with autism.


This report examined the potential effects of utilizing improvisational music therapy with children with ASD. Designated case studies and controlled trials appear to demonstrate that improvisational music therapy may help improve communicative behavior, language, emotional responsiveness, attention span, and behavior control.


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