



Getting Out of the Way: The Use of Music and Music Therapy with the Special Needs Population

Summer Mencher, MT-BC

The creative arts therapies offer nonverbal strategies for motivating engagement in special needs populations. Board certified music therapist Summer Mencher, offers insights on the use of music and music therapy with special needs children.

The more training I get, the more songs I learn, the more instruments I acquire and the more interventions I put in my box of tools, the more I realize that the most powerful asset I have as a music therapist is being ready to be unready. I'm in no way stating that having a plan and mapping out ideas is not necessary. However, I do feel it is essential to realize the importance of being present enough, brave enough, trusting enough and committed enough to get out of the way and let the child lead.

Working 1:1 with children with special needs, and being inspired by fellow music therapists and other professionals, I have found that change is most authentic when we let go of control and allow the kids to be the leaders. From my experience, I have found that kids don't tend to think things to death. They instinctively know what they need. When the child has this unique opportunity to be the boss, I have observed that their instinctual knowing takes over and they do exactly as their inner doctor prescribes in order for their greatest growth to occur.

For example, a child might play loudly and chaotically on the drums for 10 weeks straight without even acknowledging the therapist, only to one day feel enough release and support and safety to speak for the first time in years, seemingly "out of nowhere." Or, a child might not touch any musical instruments at all, and instead wander around the building, while the therapist does what can be referred to as a "holding song." This might appear as if nothing is being accomplished, but if one looks deeper, it becomes clear that this child is working on gait training, gross motor movement and entrainment to the tempo (or pace) of the song. Further, he is gaining independence, autonomy and empowerment by having the therapist validate engagement in this manner. It becomes apparent that there is much more than meets the eye.

Of course, every child is incredibly unique and some will blossom more fully with a more behaviorist approach. However, what I have found across the board is that the most important piece is *motivation*. Getting a reward provides temporary motivation for completing a task. But if the task in *itself* is motivating, that can create real, lasting change. By allowing the child to be in charge, you will invariably discover what they are most excited about, what makes them tick. This is golden. *This* is what you build the session or the day around.

She loves 70s disco music? GREAT! Let's work on balance and equilibrium through dancing to their favorite tracks. He loves toy cars? WONDERFUL! Let's work on our VV and MM sounds by making up a song where the chorus says Vroom Vroom Vroom and sing it together *while* playing with them. She loves water? PERFECT! Let's work on concepts of hot and cold, on and

off, in and out, by writing songs about opposites and allow her to fill in the blanks of what she is doing *while* she is doing it. The examples go on and on.

The seed I hope you will plant with the special needs population is to make the plans, but be willing to throw them out the window if they're not working, or if something richer arises. Learn the skills, but learn them so well that you're comfortable not knowing which ones you will need in any given moment. Challenge the child to be flexible and willing to enter into new and unfamiliar territory, but also be ready to do the same. Pave the path to success and then get out of the way.

Summer Mencher, MT-BC, is a Board Certified Music Therapist with a degree in music therapy from Berklee College of Music in Boston. She is the founder of the organization Rhythm & Truth Music Therapy, which is specifically aimed at empowering youth at-risk. As a Music Therapist, Summer uses a wide variety of music modalities (including a diverse selection of instruments, songs, improvisational techniques, relaxation techniques and creative arts) to establish non-musical goals. She has worked with youth at-risk, individuals with special needs, survivors of torture, cancer survivors, and all ages and ranges of individuals in hospitals, hospice, schools, psychiatric hospitals, rehab facilities, nursing homes, and more. To learn more, visit <http://rhythmandtruth.org/>

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