# NASET's Autism Spectrum Disorder Series

## Music Therapy as an Intervention on Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)


## By Shante Humphrey


This issue of **NASET's Autism Spectrum Disorder series** was written by Shante Humphrey. Music therapy is an alternative method used for children with autism spectrum disorder. This review was analyzed to establish the efficacy of music therapy on children with autism. Research shows that music therapy has positive effects and is a processing strength in the treatment of children with autism. (*Music and autism research*) Several studies have been conducted, which found that music can improve social interactions, communication skills, and also help bring about and increase confidence levels. It can also help control stress and anxiety, along with troubled behaviors. These are specific to children suffering from this disorder. Music is an outlet into the world of autism. It can be used to channel intense emotions, energy, and focus and connect to the world. (Levy, 2018) The main objective of this review is to reveal the effectiveness of music therapy on children with ASD. Articles were gathered and studies were conducted to determine which forms of music therapy were suited best for children with autism. Each child was assessed to determine their level of functioning while engaging in sound. After reviewing the literature and studies on this subject, it was discovered that music therapy is a competent and feasible method for children with autism.


**Abstract**

Music therapy is an alternative method used for children with autism spectrum disorder. This review was analyzed to establish the efficacy of music therapy on children with autism. Research

shows that music therapy has positive effects and is a processing strength in the treatment of children with autism (*Music and autism research*). Several studies have been conducted, which found that music can improve social interactions, communication skills, and also help bring about and increase confidence levels. It can also help control stress and anxiety, along with troubled behaviors. These are specific to children suffering from this disorder. Music is an outlet into the world of autism. It can be used to channel intense emotions, energy, and focus and connect to the world (Levy, 2018). The main objective of this review is to reveal the effectiveness of music therapy on children with ASD. Articles were gathered and studies were conducted to determine which forms of music therapy were suited best for children with autism. Each child was assessed to determine their level of functioning while engaging in sound. After reviewing the literature and studies on this subject, it was discovered that music therapy is a competent and feasible method for children with autism.

**Introduction**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is characterized by delayed or absence of language development, intellectual disabilities, poor motor coordination and attention weaknesses. (*Autism spectrum disorder (ASD): Causes, symptoms, treatment & outlook*) It is a developmental condition in the brain that causes a disruption in verbal and nonverbal communication, shortfalls in social interactions, restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, activities, or interests, and sensory difficulties. An autism diagnosis can happen as early as age 1, but every child displays signs differently (*Top rated ABA therapy & autism care* 2023). The causes of ASD can be genetically related, and other causes are unknown. Early diagnosis is the key for the developmental efficiency of a child because it improves their chances of developing the necessary skills needed for daily functioning. Diagnosing can be difficult because there are no laboratory or diagnostic tests to diagnose the disorder. Individuals with autism behave, communicate, interact, and learn differently from others. Some are advanced when it comes to verbal communication, and others are nonverbal (*Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)* 2022). There are many challenges for children with ASD, and because of these challenges, problems can occur at school and cause stress within their families. Families and caregivers also experience their own trials and tribulations. Caring for a child with autism is not an easy task and requires time and patience for everyone. It may be helpful to put yourself in their situation and understand

what they go through to get a better understanding of what autism spectrum disorder is. There is no cure for autism. However, interventions, such as speech and occupational therapy, have proven to be effective with treating a child with autism (HumAdmin, 2021). Music therapy has also been used as an interventional method to assist children with ASD improve communication and speech skills, help with expressing emotions and sharing feelings and facilitate with stimulating their cognitive functioning.

**Method**

Data was evaluated from research in this field involving narrative and systematic reviews, meta-analysis, and anecdotal case studies. The Cochrane library database up until 2021 was also searched. These findings described the benefits of music therapy for child with autism. They were explored to get a better understanding of which types of music therapy were proven to show promising and positive outcomes for children suffering from this disorder.

Three different approaches were examined: interactive music therapy, music listening, and improvisational music therapy (*American Music Therapy Association*). These approaches included songwriting, listening to music, improvising, singing, playing instruments, and dancing.

In 2018, 51 children, ranging in ages 6-12, participated and were randomly chosen to participate in a non-music therapy and the three distinct types of music therapy sessions. The children who received the music therapy showed improve sociability schools and they gained some confidence, which allowed them to open up to others (Reschke-Hernandez, 2011).

Outcomes included increased communication and social skills, vocabulary comprehension, increased attention span, and reduced anxiety. According to a meta-analysis study, music therapy showed to be associated with an increase in social reactions among children with ASD and that it allowed them to have control of their actions (Sharda et al., 2019). Younger children with ASD showed an improvement in people skills and personal responsibility. A narrative review suggested that music therapy can build stronger parent-child relationships and increase social engagement in the home environment and community (Simpson & Keen, 2011).

## Conclusion

Leo Kanner, a psychiatrist, was the first to use music therapy to work with children with autism. He observed that some non-verbal children with autism can sing, or hum and others can recognize complex melodies, making him the first to discover the therapeutic benefits of music with autism (*History of autism treatment* 2022). The National Autism Center identifies music therapy as an intervention. Many experts believe that music therapy has an impact on the brain, the nervous system, cognitive functions of children with autism and help with sensory processing (Martina Riepen, 2022). Music can stimulate the mind and function as a pathway to communication; thus, making it an effective therapy for treating children with autism. When a child with autism goes into a hyperactive state, music can calm them down because it has a strong bearing on the emotions. Music therapy is effective for relieving stress and relaxation. The duration of the sessions depend on the child's needs and is based on outcomes. The outcomes help identify the skills and the focus is placed on these skills.

## Implications

Music therapy requires specialized training for music therapists. These sessions may stimulate joint attention, enhance auditory processing, and sensory and perceptual motor skills (Kalas, 2012). It should be combined with other therapy approaches, and not used as a stand-alone intervention. Each technique should be carefully selected to fit the needs of the child.

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