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eye contact

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septo-optic dysplasia

RNIB Helping you live with sight loss

Music and children with SOD

I'd like to tell you about a little girl I met some years ago when I was teaching in a school for the blind in London. Kay was four-going on five at the time. She had septo-optic dysplasia, and was clearly something of a character: strong-willed but with a wonderful sense of humour, and passionate about her pet dog, Bertie. Her class teacher had noticed she liked singing, so I agreed to have a one-to-one music session with her and see what we could do.

"What would you like to sing?" I asked, sitting down at the piano. But before my hands had reached the keys, Kay was off, with an up-tempo version of "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" from Mary Poppins. Her singing was characterised by a raucous enthusiasm, but interestingly for me, it was perfectly in tune, in the key of G. This meant that providing an accompaniment was relatively easy, and Kay evidently relished making music with someone else, as we went through the whole song several times over, ever faster, until we both collapsed in fits of laughter.

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The music teacher within me was also excited, though for different reasons: I was wondering just what talents this young girl had. "Shall we make up a new song?", I suggested, starting to play a pattern of four chords (F, d, g, C) in a gentle blues style. Kay couldn't wait - she wanted to sing about Bertie (her dog) - and she improvised an entire song there and then for what was to be a magical three or four minutes.

Stylistically what Kay produced was coherent and mature, with musical phrases arching over my repeated sequence of chords, pitches bent to match the flattened sevenths on the piano, snatches of melody on the keyboard imitated and elaborated by the voice: a real musical conversation. Clearly, then, Kay could hear and process harmony, improvise words and melody within a known style and, above all, communicate powerfully and naturally through music.

Although she'd never had lessons, I knew Kay had a small keyboard at home, and I wondered if she was yet able to play by ear. Sure enough, invited to take her turn at the piano, she picked out the tune of "supercalifragilistic ...", despite using the eccentric fingering of one who is self-taught and has never had a visual model as a guide. For a musically trained adult to achieve what Kay had managed to do in those few minutes would have been remarkable: but for so young a child, who had never had music lessons, it was surely nothing short of miraculous. And yet from my experience of working with a number of blind children, many of whom had learning difficulties, I knew that Kay's abilities were far from unique.

Survey of musical ability

I had just completed a survey (in 1988) of 50 children, who had been blind since birth or shortly afterwards. Of these, 20 (40 per cent) had perfect pitch (the capacity to recognise or produce a given note in isolation) meaning that they were around 40,000 times more likely than those who are fully sighted to have this ability. Of these, seven had what I would describe as an exceptional level of musical attainment -able to play an instrument fluently, for example. Of those children with SOD that I had worked with, one was in this exceptional group, another had an above average level of musical ability, and the musical attainment of four was average or below. However, for two of these, music was particularly important as a source of emotional reassurance.

Since then, speaking to a number of parents whose children have SOD, it is noticeable how many remark on how much their sons

and daughters enjoy listening to music, and what a large part it appears to play in their lives. And most recently, of course, one child - Rex Lewis-Clack, from Los Angeles, in the United States, who is still only eight - has reached the attention of the media for his remarkable abilities on the piano. Like Kay, he has perfect pitch, and he can play by ear, though his talents have developed to learning both tunes and accompaniments just by listening and being able to reproduce them on the keyboard with apparent ease. Unlike her, he has learning difficulties, which makes Rex's achievements all the more remarkable, and means he is regarded as a musical "savant": someone with exceptional abilities despite limited global development.

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Using music with your child

So what does all this mean for the parents and carers of children with SOD? For sure, if you don't already, it is worth thinking of using music as part of your child's educational or therapeutic programs, particularly if they are young or in the early stages of development. Music can be used to promote communication, to support learning and understanding, and as a medium for socialising. Through association with particular people, places or activities, different pieces can help map out the structure of the day. Music offers a unique source of comfort and reassurance. Above all, listening to music or music-making can be immensely pleasurable activities, open to everyone at some level.

And who knows, maybe your child will be one of those with unusual or even exceptional musical potential. How will you be able to tell? Perhaps they sing particularly well in tune, or have started to pick out tunes on the keyboard or other instrument. If so, the advice of an experienced music teacher should be sought as soon as possible. Not everyone will turn out to be a Rex Lewis-Clack, of course, but for many, playing or singing will bring a huge sense of enjoyment that should be fostered and relished. Despite all these practical suggestions, music educators, therapists and psychologists are still a long way from understanding why it is that some children, particularly those with certain syndromes such as SOD, find music particularly fascinating, or go on to develop special musical talents. And clearly, the more we can find out, the better we will be able to support these children now and in the future.

Increasing our understanding

A questionnaire and activity sheet has recently been sent out to families in the UK who have a child with SOD. The activities test verbal fluency, sound differentiation and memory and have been devised by a group of senior academics and professionals in the fields of music, psychology, psychiatry and education in the US and the UK. They are intended to shed light on how the development of musical interests and abilities fits in with more general intellectual and social maturation. I will keep Eye Contact readers informed of the findings. If you would like to get in touch to ask anything about music and your child - or to reflect on anything that has been particularly successful (or unsuccessful) - then please do. I look forward to hearing from you!

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