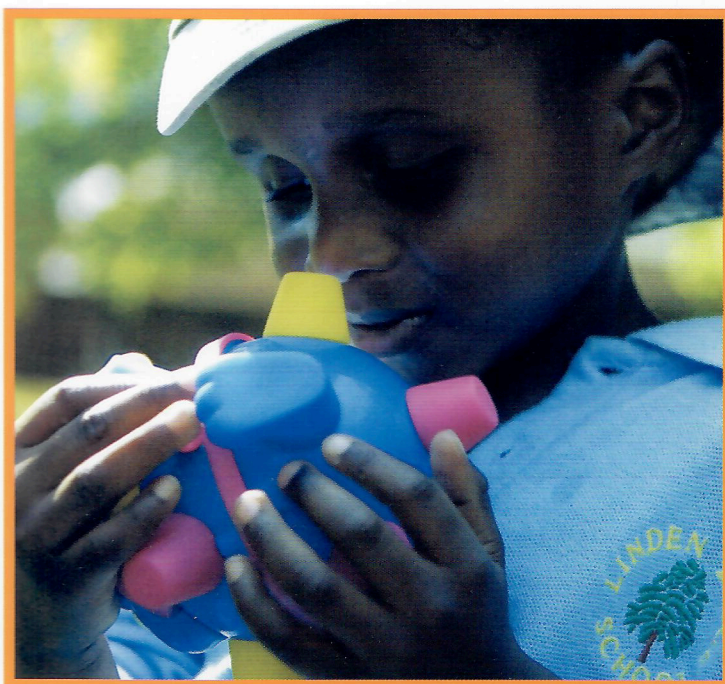


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Music therapy or music education?

Which will be most helpful for your child, music therapy or music education? What is the difference between the two? These are questions that parents have asked RNIB's Music Advisory Service at one time or another, and there are no easy answers! In this article RNIB's Adam Ockelford, attempts to make things a little clearer.

What is music therapy?

Kenneth Bruscia, writing back in 1989, defines music therapy as 'a systematic process of intervention wherein the therapist helps the client to achieve health, using musical experiences and the relationships that develop through them as dynamic forces of change.' More recently (in 1994), Leslie Bunt concludes that 'music therapy is the use of organised sounds and music within an evolving relationship between client and therapist to support and encourage physical, mental, social and emotional well-being.' In reality, though, therapists working with children with learning difficulties have done (and continue to do) a lot more than this. For example, Paul Nordoff and Clive Robbins (writing in 1971), give an account of how the children they worked with learnt 'new activities, new words, new music', and became more responsive to other people; how a young girl began to develop speech through music therapy; and how music assisted a boy with autistic spectrum disorder to develop independence skills. Pier Postacchini, working with a team in 1993, discusses how music therapy sessions with a five-year-old girl with 'severe infantile regression' were thought to improve, among other things, her

movement and use of vision, and assist in her evolution from pre-symbolic to symbolic communication. Among the aims of music therapy that Leslie Bunt himself lists in working with a nine-year-old boy with learning difficulties are 'to help develop auditory awareness and memory' (1994). In the same year, Frans Schwalkwijk writes of the potential role of music therapy in the stimulation of motor and cognitive skills.

But some of these areas - promoting learning and development - could reasonably be regarded as being part of educational provision. Indeed, the leaflet *Music Therapy in the Education Service* (published by the Association of Professional Music Therapists in 1992) is quite explicit about the role that music therapists can assume when working in education, proposing that music therapy may be a valuable means of facilitating access to the music curriculum. But why should music therapists have become involved in music-educational activity? There are a number of possible reasons, including the fact that those working in music education at all levels have been comparatively inactive in the field of special needs: taking on pupils with learning difficulties is not something that the majority of teachers have in the past seen

as part of their role. Moreover, relatively little has been written on music education for children with disabilities - and almost nothing in relation to those with complex needs. Finally, while there are a number of nationally recognised courses in music therapy, there is currently no comparable training in music education for those who wish to work with children with severe, or profound and multiple learning difficulties. However, things are changing, and the 'Sounds of Intent' project - a joint initiative between RNIB and the Institute of Education, University of London, supported by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation - is currently investigating the musicality of children who are functionally still in the early stages of development, and will soon be designing music curricula to meet their needs.

Music education for children with complex needs

The Sounds of Intent team sees music education as falling into two distinct categories: education in music, and education through music. Education in music was discussed at some length in a recent issue of eye contact [no. 40 Autumn 2004]. Here, we will look in more depth at education through music, since this appears to overlap more with the work of many music therapists. Education through music may be defined as music education being used to support and promote wider learning and development. There are four main areas:

Music and movement

Children's body awareness, and the control and co-ordination of a wide range of movements can be fostered through playing instruments and other sound-makers, the will to move deriving from a child's wish to produce a certain sound. For many young people with complex needs, who may find movement particularly challenging, specialist MIDI-switching devices such as the 'Soundbeam' (which works through an invisible ultrasonic ray) may provide the

necessary interface, since here there is no direct link between the nature of the movement that is made and the sound that is produced: any movement - however tiny - can cause or control any sound - of any loudness! Conversely, the movements that children make in response to music may be freely expressive, or influenced by the characteristics of the music. (Loud sounds with large movements and quiet sounds with small ones etc.)

Music and learning

Many children with severe or profound learning difficulties have difficulty in making sense of what they see and hear. A simplified auditory environment, with only important sounds modified or enhanced, can help: for example, a room may be identified with a distinctive set of windchimes suspended in the doorway, or areas used occasionally may be characterised by a particular piece of music playing in the background. Some activities may consistently be accompanied by music in an appropriate style, and key individuals may wear carefully selected jangling bracelets, to augment their presence in sensory terms.

Children may be encouraged to identify and classify objects through their sound-making qualities. For instance, the ringing, bell-like sounds of metal may be contrasted with the more mellow response of wood, and items sorted on this basis. Other concepts may be extracted from the experience of music too. The opposing ideas of 'slowly' and 'quickly', 'start' and 'stop', 'the same' and 'different', 'together' and 'alone', and 'again' and 'finished' are integral to musical structure and performance. Number features widely in music and it can be used in several ways to promote learning. For example, children can consider the number of times a tambourine is tapped in a repeating pattern. Finally, it is worth remembering that all pieces of music and musical instruments are products of the society in which they originate, and offer rich sources of cultural information.