

# Come on Along & Listen to... My Song!



By Jerry O'Leary, MA, MT-BC

There is a great deal of focus and attention drawn to the childhood phenomenon known as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). One major reason is that more medical and educational professionals have become aware of the problem and how to recognize its symptoms. There are many theories as to what causes autism but that is not the purpose of this article. Let us look at a particular type of intervention that helps people afflicted with this condition move from days of isolation to a healthier lifestyle. The intervention is known as music therapy.

## MUSIC AS THERAPY

Music therapy is a recognized field with over 7,000 practicing professionals applying their skills to assist all kinds of people suffering from many difficulties throughout their lives. Why does music therapy have such a profound affect on autistic populations? Music is a part of our daily life. It offers a safe, non-invasive means of entering the autistic world of seclusion. Music as therapy attracts and subtly encourages the autistic person to become more socially engaged, communicative, creative and reactive to those around him. Music therapy offers a means of self-expression within a supportive environment in which a person can succeed.

The research available on ASD and music therapy itself keeps evolving each and every day. However, the reaction of a child affected by this challenge to a music therapy program is a sight to behold.

## A PRACTICAL APPROACH

While working as a music therapist at the Lower School of Archway Programs in Atco, New Jersey, I had the unique opportunity to work with a challenged but talented group of young boys and girls affected by ASD. Working with a staff of dedicated professionals in the fields of special education, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, equestrian therapy, art therapy, psychology and social work was a rewarding and satisfying experience, a true team approach.

One constant and resounding expression shared by all team members was that the children "loved to come to music therapy sessions; they looked forward to it." On more than several occasions, a distressed or overly agitated boy or girl would arrive at the music therapy classroom unannounced because he or she felt safe there. Music therapy offers a friendly environment in which a person can learn, become more socially involved and freely express himself.

## CLINICAL OBSERVATIONS

What observations do music therapists make as clinicians in seeing their work impacting the lives of these children and their families? Music innately enters a person's world and attracts their attention. Repetitive behaviors are interrupted by music therapy intervention bringing the person in tune with the world around them. A person's attention is drawn through curiosity to a musical instrument, a rhythmic expression, a melody or a group musical activity. A person's natural interest is intrigued by musical instruments and aroused by the act of making music. Musical group interaction can be achieved in a non-threatening manner and tailored to invite a person to join in and contribute to the music making activity. When autistic people experience the music making activity, they can be more easily engaged in this type of group activity facilitating the growth and development process. And the music making practice can accentuate positive behavior, focus, attentiveness and group interaction. We are not saying that music therapy is a cure for ASD, but that music as therapy can enhance a person's strengths while building upon their weaknesses.

## IN CONCLUSION

Music therapy can offer someone with ASD an opportunity to take that first step into the world around him and safely start to interact, communicate and develop relationships with his family, his school and his community. More importantly, music therapy can propose a sound path from the cloud of isolation to a more social and interactive life.

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