I Saw, I Heard, I Conquered: Using Developmental Music Therapy to Help Kids with Special Needs

By Joe Romano

I am a songwriter, musician and music teacher. My passion is to help people struggling with developmental, learning and behavioral challenges. Several years ago, I met Dr. Steve Gallop, a developmental optometrist who provides visual training to children with special needs. He suggested that I was a Developmental Music Therapist after hearing my philosophy and methods.

My Story

As a child I had an eye that turned in, causing other kids to ridicule me. My mom refused to accept surgery - the only solution offered by professionals. I was determined to fix the problem myself, so I created a program of activities I thought would help. I did them every night alone in my room. Dr. Gallop was stunned when I described what I had done. The program of activities I had intuitively designed was, as it turns out, visual training.

Another interesting change occurred as a result of my visual training program. Musical notes sounded like noise during the years my eye was turning. After my visual training rewired my brain and my eyes started working together, chords started making sense and sounding musical.

Music: The Engine that Makes Things Go

I believe the visual process is the most important means of interacting with the environment and therefore must be considered in any successful therapy. Music is a universal language that provides a unique way to communicate and relate to children with special needs. There is a direct connection between how we hear and how we see. Music is immune to the baggage and expectations of the spoken word. Formal rules of music are unnecessary for children to enjoy making sounds they find enjoyable.

We are a musical as well as a visual species. It has been proven that the cycling of specific note patterns in combination with certain rhythms can affect our heart rate, breathing patterns and our emotions. Neurologist and best-selling author, Oliver Sacks addresses this issue in his book, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*. Sacks explains that music occupies more areas of the brain than language.

Have Instruments, Will Travel!

I take a portable keyboard and CD player with pre-programmed music to a child's home. I prefer to work where the child is surrounded by familiar toys and feels safe. I'm not trying to make musicians, but to help children blossom and open them up emotionally via music. First I make a connection by combining eye movements, spatial orientation and music.

Eliciting Eye Contact

Every action starts with the ability to make and sustain eye contact. First, I pick up two stuffed animals, one in each hand, and move them in different directions. Because of the familiarity of the objects, the child soon begins tracking. Then I give one of the animals a funny voice, while moving it around within the field of vision. Now the child is looking AND listening. Next I begin integrating sight, sound and touch by alternately touching the child and playing a note on the keyboard with the stuffed animal. It's always rewarding to see a child begin to interact.

Developmental Music Therapy

I believe that combining visual processing with music creates an ideal medium for children with autism to interact with their surroundings. I include some of the same visual training techniques I created as a child, somewhat enhanced thanks to Dr. Gallop.

The C Game

I place four colored dots spread four inches apart on the wall just above the keyboard, within arm's reach, from a standing position. I also place four corresponding colored dots on the keyboard, one on each C note. I position the child in front of middle-C on the keyboard and direct the child to touch a colored dot on the wall with the index finger and then turn in a complete circle and hit the corresponding colored dot on the keyboard.

As children progress, they gradually learn how to control their bodies, by leading with vision and becoming more skilled in using their hips and feet to turn and balance to finish centered in front of middle-C. This also helps them learn how to orient in space and time. Another goal is to have them move their eyes independently of their bodies or heads, which is an important developmental milestone. I can easily customize my interactions since each child is unique.

Rhythm

Children on the spectrum often seem devoid of any awareness of rhythm in their everyday lives; their natural sense of rhythm must be stimulated to carry out actions more effectively. I realized this for the first time many years ago while watching the "mentally disturbed" non-verbal brother of a bandmate during rehearsal. This supposedly unresponsive child was definitely tuning in, particularly to the drums, and trying to move his body to the rhythm of the music. One day, I put the drumsticks in his hands, and guided his arms around the drumset. It was apparent that he was also playing the drums on his own when nobody was around. Responding to rhythm and his own emotions allowed him to do an extraordinary thing; engage in constructive self-directed, self-motivated activity.

I strategically introduce soundscapes – pre-recorded combinations of specific note patterns and rhythms into the sessions to help enhance the impact of the other parts of the lesson. I can often observe the changes in breathing and attention. The right soundscape can also help these children fall and stay asleep, another common problem for the children I work with.

Achieving Extraordinary Things

This is what my work is all about – possibilities. "What Joe did for himself as a child is just extraordinary to me," says Dr. Gallop. "I have since learned that what Joe does, in general, is pretty extraordinary." Extraordinary? Not to me. My work is all about the possibility of achieving extraordinary things.

Joe Romano works out of the Philadelphia area and can be reached at JoeRomano@comcast.net and 610.359.6254. Dr. Steve Gallop practices in Broomall, PA. He can be reached at 610.356.7425.