

# Take your partner

For the past five years Aidan, 10, has been attending Giant Steps Sydney, a school for children with autism, where regular music therapy sessions are a core part of the program. Aidan's severe autism means he has delayed language development and learning difficulties and, like other children with autism he has difficulty socialising. Music Therapist, Bronte Arns, has built on Aidan's love of music - and his tendency to move to it - with a ballroom dance program that has enabled him to share a simple, but otherwise inconceivable pleasure: dancing with a girl.

"Aidan and his classmates were approaching an age where they would soon be attending social dances, and we felt that the development of some partnered dance skills would help families be better able to include their child in family occasions such as weddings and parties.

One of the core deficits of autism is a difficulty with reading social cues and initiating social interaction and this can mean that, later in life, people with autism find it difficult to fit in at social occasions.

**"For individuals with no language, music provides such an important common ground."**

Bronte says Aidan's deep enjoyment of music was already evident. He loved to move around the room while music was playing, occasionally swaying and often vocalising. But he only ever danced solo.

"Before we started the ballroom dancing program Aidan never initiated finding someone to share his love



As anyone who sings or plays a musical instrument will tell you, making music, especially with others, is great for the mind, body and soul. And the benefits flow whether you are an accomplished musician or an enthusiastic amateur. In music therapy trained health professionals - registered music therapists - draw on the benefits of music to help people of all ages and abilities achieve and maintain good health and wellbeing. Music therapists work

in a range of places including hospitals, nursing homes, schools and the community, delivering tailor-made programs to meet specific needs.

In special education, music therapists work with children with intellectual and/or physical disabilities to help them meet educational goals, at the same time offering an alternative to traditional teaching methods. Music education and music therapy complement each other, though there is an important difference. While the aim of music education is to achieve music-related outcomes for the child with special needs, music therapists use music primarily to achieve non-music goals and aim for a general improvement in the child's quality of life.

Music therapy may include using music to increase opportunities for cognitive and sensory stimulation and to help develop motor skills, orientation and mobility. Music therapy provides an outlet for a child's emotional expression, increased awareness of the immediate environment and of other people, and enhances self-confidence through active music making. Music therapy can also help improve a child's social skills and communication.

The techniques used by music therapists can include songwriting, free or structured movement to music activities, singing and vocal activities, improvisation, playing traditional instruments or digital music equipment, listening to recorded music and educational songs.

of music and dancing," says Bronte. "We wanted to give him the chance to learn and practice the skills of a social dance - skills that so many of us take for granted, but which are actually very difficult for people with autism: things like the confidence to invite a partner to dance, positioning the body appropriately and sustaining and enjoying the social connection for the whole dance."

"For this program, we worked on a well known waltz, 'Edelweiss': with its steady, predictable beat it encourages a swaying motion. We also practised other kinds of movement to this music, including playing the instrument he loves most - the drum kit. The kit was set

up so that he could watch his partner move and imitate their pace and movement with his drum beat. We had lots of 'shared experience' moments during these activities: laughing, pausing and together building a sense of anticipation and release at the high points of the music.

"We modelled for him how to 'invite' a partner to dance - wordlessly, of course, and where to place his hands on his partner. After a few weeks he began walking over to a classmate or adult and taking their hand to lead them out to the dance floor.

"He showed a keen interest in the 'twirl the girl' move! By the end of the program, he was coming back to the correct position with his partner after a twirl every time. While he was dancing, we watched as he held his partner's gaze, smiled, giggled and shared a whole range of emotions.

"The program culminated in the end-of-year concert, where the boys of his class performed their waltz with staff for an audience of their family and friends. Aidan paraded onto the concert stage, holding his partner's hands up high, and performed his moves beautifully. It was such an achievement for Aidan, and one of the most memorable moments for me as a music therapist."

What is it about music that is so powerful in the care and education of children with special needs?

"For individuals with no language, music provides such an important common ground," says Giant Steps' family support worker, Helen Appleton. "You can get to know a child through music in a way you can't with anything else. For example, if you're working with a child with no language and you create sound together - you hum like them, or match their pitch or tones - they really start to pay attention to you. It's a way of connecting."

Helen says the work with Aidan and his classmates has also focused on expanding their music listening choices. They've not just stepped out to Edelweiss, they've become avid Beyoncé fans too.

"Sometimes families of children with intellectual disabilities will inadvertently limit their child's listening experiences. Out of habit they might put on The Wiggles or Hi 5, because they know the child has always enjoyed that music, but it's good to get children more age-appropriate materials and expand their choices. That can open the way to these children sharing more experiences with their siblings such as watching music videos."

At home, one of the unexpected outcomes of the music and dance program is that Aidan is now transferring

some of those social skills into other environments - often a particular difficulty for people with autism.

"Aidan's parents have told me that he has been watching dance programs on TV at home, and then finding them to bring them in to dance with him in the lounge room," says Bronte Arns. "Changes like that can make a big difference to families of children with autism."



### what we know about...

### music and special education

"Research shows that when two people interact, their bodies move together in time using microscopic movements that are not discernible to the human eye. These tiny movements are missing for people who are on the Autistic spectrum. This knowledge, combined with emerging research about mirror neurons in the brain - our mind acts as though it is participating in an experience even when we are just watching it - suggests that people with Autism have problems sharing experiences with other people.

Although it is logical to assume that this lack of coordination would include musical participation, musical pathways in the brain are so diverse and widely distributed that the impact of Autism is diminished. Music offers a balance between structure and freedom that makes sense for young people with Autism and can provide a platform for interpersonal encounters. Although people with Autism tend to interact in rigid and repetitive ways that lack an understanding of the desires of other people, interactions in music are different.

The very nature of music means that it can guarantee the success of a social interaction because it goes beyond the usual challenges facing a group of people when they interact. For example, when attending a music concert, it is acceptable to cry together, even if the person beside you is a stranger. People from different cultural or political backgrounds can put aside differences when they sing, dance, or listen together. Music transcends difference and creates opportunities to connect beyond talking and the need for shared beliefs. Few other social encounters offer this opportunity."

**Dr Katrina McFerran, University of Melbourne**



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