

Music Therapy: An Interactive and Non-Verbal Intervention

Susan Hamilton



Susan Hamilton, Director of Marketing at the Otakar Kraus Music Trust, is responsible for all the charity's marketing activities and fundraising. She joined the Trust in January 2005 and has a passionate belief in the work provided by the Trust, particularly since she has seen so many positive results and reactions that are generated by music therapy.

Summary

Otakar Kraus Music Trust (OKMT) has been a provider of music therapy for 20 years. This article explains the way in which music therapy can help in the development of children with special needs and how the power of music is able to open a door towards a better quality of life. OKMT has also initiated some unique group work based around music therapy, which is also outlined within the article.

Introduction

Music and *therapy* are two words, but by linking them together a discipline is created which serves as a key that opens a door towards a better quality of life for children with special needs.

Music therapy is becoming increasingly more recognised as an effective tool in supporting the development of a special needs child. It is an interactive, primarily non-verbal intervention, enabling a process through which children can express themselves, become aware of their feelings and interact more easily. Music therapy can provide new insights into the child's functioning which assists therapists to work with children of all ages with a wide range of problems.

Otakar Kraus Music Trust (OKMT) was founded in 1990 with the aim of providing Music Therapy for children and adults with such conditions and needs as communication disorders, learning difficulties, mental health problems, physical difficulties, emotional problems and challenging behaviour. Headquartered in Twickenham, Middlesex, with 15 outreach centres throughout West London and the Home Counties, the Trust is licensed to provide Music Therapy throughout the United Kingdom. It annually holds over 2000 individual and 300 group sessions. These are predominantly for children but a growing awareness of the potential that can stem from Music Therapy means that more adults are now benefiting from the work.

The therapists themselves have to complete a three-year training course. At OKMT each of the therapists holds a postgraduate Diploma in Music Therapy approved by the Health Professions Council (HPC). They are State registered and are members of the Association of Professional Music Therapists (APMT). The Trust operates strict health & safety and child protection policies.

Music is a powerful emotional medium which can affect all of us deeply. The ability to respond to music is inborn and remains unimpaired by injury, disability, trauma and illness. Music is a universal language, overcoming all barriers. In Music Therapy sessions, interactive music is spontaneously created by the client and the therapist. No music skills are needed by the child. Accessible instruments are provided in a well-equipped therapy room. These include easy-to-play percussion instruments as well as larger pieces such as piano, gongs, congas and cymbals.

A therapist seeks to establish contact with the child (client) through the shared use of sound. During each session the client is encouraged to use his/her voice and to experiment with the instruments before him/



Playing music together... a musical connection is being played out between a young client and therapist, Edison Carolino.

There is a clear response to the musical interaction as focus and concentration can be seen in the boy's demeanour.

her. This is an opportunity to explore the world of sound and develop a personal musical language. The therapist responds. Gradually a musical relationship is established in which emotions can be expressed and explored in a safe environment – developing individuality, self-awareness, motivation, confidence and choice. Depending on the needs of the child, the therapist will plan how long a course of music therapy may take. This could be from a few weeks to several years. If there are specific aims to see a child through a particular traumatic period, this therapy could be short-term. If the aim is more general, to do with communication difficulties for example, therapy would be longer and could take several years. The sessions are usually weekly and last between 30 and 40 minutes according to the working tolerance of the child.

Some Music Therapy Outcomes

Music Therapy does not aim to teach the child musical skills, rather it uses improvised music as a medium through which to meet therapeutic aims. Its effects can perhaps be better understood by looking at some results of the work – made anonymous here because the work is private and confidential. These are as follows:

A 14 year old autistic girl was non-verbal. She immediately responded to the shared improvisation on the piano with her therapist. With continued encouragement, she spoke her first words four months later.

A boy with Down's Syndrome has a natural gift for music which was discovered when working with his therapist. This is helping him overcome the difficulties brought about by his condition. He has become a self-confident and joyful teenager.



A young girl with Down's Syndrome is clearly enjoying the interaction with the therapist and her mother.

Playing the drums helps with balance and co-ordination and allows for the musical connection to continue.

It is also clearly a lot of fun.

A previously non-verbal boy with cerebral palsy can now communicate through singing words joyfully.

At 9 years old, this young boy terrorised his neighbourhood. Through playing the piano with his therapist he has acquired his missing self-esteem. He now attends school daily and leads a more productive life.

Through a specially devised system of music and colour introduced by one of OKMT's therapists, a dyslexic girl's confidence and ability to learn are growing.

In working for many years with its special children, OKMT has developed its work by adding additional dimensions to the therapy it provides. Established clinical music therapy will always be the core of the Trust's work, but in some of its group activities the organisation has added additional creative elements to meet needs it has identified within the local community. These groups have been put into a module format so that they can be used in other areas around the country. These include Music Club, CLUB OK and The Music in Me.

Music Club

Music Club is the brainchild of one of OKMT's therapists, Edison Carolino. It was created to provide a special interactive group therapy project for children with special needs. Those who participate have a variety of disabilities and come from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds.

The objective of the programme is to allow children with disabilities to socially interact within their group (a particular challenge for autistic children). The club assists children in learning such social skills as helping each other, playing together and turn-taking. This builds self-confidence, encourages a greater



Lights and shadows form part of the Music Club project to attract and retain concentration from those attending

ability to communicate with others and develops an ability to concentrate. Above all, Music Club gives children with challenging disabilities the opportunity to develop self-expression while enjoying and playing with others through music.

Children come together as an 'audience'. Their attention is captured by the therapist who performs with lights and shadows behind a screen. He steps out from behind the screen and starts to play an instrument or series of instruments and then works with each child individually so that they can join him in the experience of sharing music. Each child joins the therapist for a turn at an instrument. The music continues to hold the audience's attention. In some cases a child helps the next to get into position or shows him or her the different choices of musical instruments.

The children in the audience all have difficulties that hinder communication, movement, attention span or interaction. The power of music can begin a process whereby difficulties start to erode and the barriers can be overcome. Music Club is attended by a parent and their feedback is always welcomed. For example:

'Music Club has been a great confidence booster for my son. His first smile ever was seen during this session.'

This is one quote from a mother of an autistic boy. It is not unique and is one of the reasons why Music Club is about to enter its fourth year.

CLUB OK

CLUB OK is a project which was identified by OKMT to support teenagers with disabilities such as autism and Down's Syndrome in their teen years – although it is not limited to any specific condition. Many parents had expressed concern that their children were lonely. In spite of the fact that their condition can make it difficult to interact with others, they nonetheless want to have friends and get involved with an activity outside the home environment in the way they see their siblings enjoying. The facilities available to help them socially develop are limited and in many instances not suited to the need of the individual.

In response to these needs, the Trust set up CLUB OK as a unique club for teenagers with special needs. Although the club operates within a clinical environment, it presents itself in a club-like format with an opportunity for the group to socialise with their peers. A qualified music therapist supervises the group, using music and creativity to unite them with a common interest. This not only allows them to interact with their peers, but at the same time assists with their development and transition into the teen world and beyond. Although the programme is fun, it encourages above all an overall growth in self-esteem and independence.

CLUB OK combines music with creativity. Each week's activities revolve around a chosen topic. If for an example 'Spain' is the choice of the day, the music and rhythms of the country are used to attract attention. Pictures – still and moving – are shown before painting, drama, CDs and the playing of instruments are used to explore the Spanish experience. An all-embracing subject such as this can run over to another meeting, sustaining continuity and building on excitement. A defined subject matter which acts as the theme of the day creates a common talking point during the breaks, facilitating interaction.

By using a wide range of creative tools, CLUB OK members are able to have fun and get involved. Not only is this a source of enjoyment but it also benefits social skills and interaction with their peers. It became obvious quite quickly that club members had become aware of their peers at meetings, showing interest if one missed a session. They also showed a developing sense of the effect big and small events have in the lives of their new friends, e.g. birthdays, death in a family, etc. As with Music Club, the feedback and success achieved by this particular programme has led to a second Club OK in the weekly timetable.

The Music in Me

It is Otakar Kraus Music Trust's mantra that every person is a human being and, regardless of their dis-



Three special needs teenagers from Club OK work with a volunteer as the start of a 'Dance with a Flag'.

They work as a team to keep the flag in the air, interacting with each other as a unit.

ability, is worthy of respect and is entitled to the best quality of life attainable. The Trust also understands the importance and necessity of listening to the needs of parents and family – recognising the effect that a special needs child can have on the dynamics of the family unit. Following meetings with parents over the past twenty years the Trust has reported that:

- 75% suffer from stress
- 72% suffer sleep deprivation
- there is a high divorce rate
- most families receive little support

In response, a pilot scheme is to be introduced for parents entitled 'The Music in Me'. This six-week course of workshops is aimed specifically for parents to help them, not only with the continued development of their child, but also to assist them in facing challenging behaviour in a productive way. The scheme will give parents the opportunity of helping both their child and the family unit through a hands-on approach which will have an immediate, practical application. Above all it is designed to enable parents to develop a sense of personal empowerment within their own family unit as they become more able to cope with disruptive conditions in the home. The pilot course will start in April 2010.

'Music therapy has brought joy into my child's life and restored hope and harmony to our family.'

This is a poignant quote from the mother of an autistic child. Such is the power of music!

Contact

The Otakar Kraus Music Trust is headquartered at:
3 Twining Avenue, Twickenham, TW2 5LL.

Tel: 0208 894 2007

E-mail: okmtrust@aol.com

Website: www.okmtrust.co.uk