

MUSIC IN THE PLAY ROOM

BY JANE L. JOHNSON, LCSW

Over the years there has almost always been a tape player in my office. When the play therapy equipment moved out of the office and into its own room a tape recorder was included there along with musical instruments. As a former student of piano, choir member and a classical music lover, music has always been a part of my daily routine. At the office it has been most helpful in relaxing clients, soothing a brain that struggles with paperwork and in play therapy. And, so it was that a recent introduction to music therapy affirmed for me the therapeutic value of including musical activities in the play therapy process.

Music therapy is a newcomer to the mental health field even though the use of music in healing dates back over twenty five hundred years to the ancient Greeks. Historically, music and singing were used by early

physicians to cure many ailments including "melancholia." Healing with sound and rhythm is used by many cultures throughout the world (Ornstein and Sobel, 1989). Music is described as a nonverbal medium that allows people to access and express emotions that they might not be able to express verbally (sounds similar to play therapy). Music therapists use voice, instruments and participatory performance as the vehicle for reaching something in people that words won't touch (Fish, 1996). Music therapy is used to help people cope with the physical and emotional effects of many different illnesses. Hospitals use it in many treatment settings: chronic pain management, before and after surgery to calm patients, coronary care units and birthing centers. The rhythm and patterning of music is used with Parkinson's disease to improve walking and with closed-head injuries and other neurological disorders. It is widely used in mental health in the treatment of substance abuse, PTSD, bereavement, and with autistic and disabled children. Programs in music therapy are offered locally at the Naropa Institute in Boulder and at CSU.

With troubled teens, music therapy has been used to help them gain insight into their behavior, their expression of emotions and interpretation of other people's emotions. Impulsive, angry kids may start with loud and angry rhythms but gradually develop a slower, more controlled approach to the music and to life (Fish, 1996). An article on music therapy appears in Rudolf Dreikurs' *Conflict in the Classroom* (1965) in which Dreikurs discusses using music with psychotic children. Music played in the background "stimulates participation, permits an increase in the child's attention span, and raises his frustration tolerance."

Music with a group offers a different avenue for relating and for working together; a great vehicle for facilitating group cohesiveness. Violet Oaklander (1978) recommends tape recording these group efforts to add a sense of accomplishment to the positive feelings that are generated.

What I had discovered for myself by simply having music playing in my office was the children found it not only calming and soothing, but uplifting; it allowed them to laugh freely, be silly and even break into a spontaneous dance. In the playroom we have several tapes of children's songs and silly songs. Some children have simply played them for background while others will stop and listen or sing along. One child would simply tune the radio to a favorite station, turn it up loud and proceed to play. Whether soothing or distracting, the music was obviously important to this child's therapeutic process.

Musical instruments allow children to create their own rhythms, tempo and volume that expresses their mood. Rhythm instruments such as tambourines, castanets, bells, triangles and drums are especially effective because they do not require the child to read music as a keyboard, flute and guitar do. Pianos, xylophones and other instruments should not, however, be overlooked because children can create their own music and experience tones that are higher, lower, loud or soft. One child I worked with who did read music and knew how to play was able to use the little piano to do some self-soothing in the midst of some very traumatic play.

Music in whatever form helps children to work on themes of nurturing, empowerment, self-esteem and the full range of emotions from anger to joyous celebration. Music for nurturing would probably be soothing, calming and comforting. For empowerment, marches are great, but I have found kids singing or playing rock and roll with great bravado. In our playroom we also have a microphone that has facilitated much empowerment and self-esteem as performing for their therapist helps kids to access feelings of pride in themselves.

If you have a variety of tapes that can tap the various emotions kids will find what they need to match their mood. What Ornstein and Sobel (1989) suggest is if the music first matches someone's mood, even though it is quite tense, that it will resonate with the physiological state then lead the person to a more relaxed state as that person gets in sync with the music. Oaklander (1978) recommends classical music as it is conducive to accessing feelings and evoking moods and images. I personally would suggest different types of classical music; orchestral, quartets, individual instruments and even some opera, such as the "Torreador Song" or "Modern Major General" from *Pirates of Penzance*. There are pieces from *Pictures at an Exhibition* by Mussorgsky that are particularly evocative. "Ballet of the Chickens" and "Great Gate of Kiev" come to mind. With a dual tape recorder and CD player you can create some very interesting recordings of music for the play room. One criteria for selection might be that a piece of music not be so intense that it is distracting or triggers overwhelming,

strong feelings. Another criteria for a collection of pieces might be to intersperse soothing, calming music in between music that evokes feelings of sadness, fear or anger.

Inexpensive CD's or cassettes of classical music can be found in any store selling music. Tapes of silly songs can also be found in the kids' section. Three great tapes that I found at the 1995 APT Conference were *Take Me With You*, *Wha'd ya Wanna Do?*, and *Stayin' Over* by Peter Alsop. Some fun titles include, "Bored, Bored, Bored", "Yecch" and "I am a Pizza." There are also songs with a message like "You're Okay", "My Body" and "You Get a Little Extra When You Watch TV".

Music soothes the soul, distracts from pain, releases endorphins and alters the brain's electrical rhythms. It reaches out to children in a way that words cannot. Given that music is such a powerful medium with so many healing properties, it deserves a place in your playroom. Some study of music therapy techniques may also prove to offer some very effective tools in the play therapy process. Put some music into play and listen to where it takes you and your clients!

References

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