

The Power of Music in Therapy for Children with Special Needs

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The Power of Music in Therapy for Children with Special Needs

I have been conducting Music Therapy Sessions for special children and workshops for teachers working in special schools in Maharashtra in general and Aurangabad in Particular, well-known for tourism, hot summers and Paithani Silk. I conduct these sessions in Marathi and for the first time I am presenting this paper in English.

I am elated and proud to present my work before an audience that is keen to spread awareness about the need for sensitivity in human relations for the well-being of society. The kind of work I do is special because it is innovative and result-oriented. It is aimed at the well-being of invisible and neglected sections of society.

A chance visit in 2015 to Navjeevan School for Mentally Retarded, Naregaon was a life-changing experience. The children aged between 6 and 18 had varying degrees of intellectual disability like seizures, mood disorders and anxiety. Some of these children couldn't move around, a few couldn't control drooling and some were hyper active; one kid even bit my leg. I was shaken, but felt sympathetic. I wanted to learn more and enrolled as a volunteer to assist the teachers at Navjeevan. As I spent more time at the school, I realized these children craved love. A couple of months later, I was able to build a rapport with the kids. My interactions with special educators and teachers taught me more about the disabilities, their causes, symptoms and responses to stimuli. Each child was different and their physical and emotional needs were different.

I was desperate to help these children, but was clueless. Three months later, when I saw the children react happily to music being played to them, it struck me that I could use my degree in

Music (*Sangeet Visharad*) and my singing skills to connect with them. It wouldn't be out of place to mention here that I am a part of *Swara Sadhana* Music Group.

The following day I played the Tanpura and Tabla along with some nursery rhymes. What followed was magical. A combination of melody, rhythm and my exaggerated gestures while singing had a tremendous impact on the children. The hyper active ones stayed still, while the silent ones started clapping and moving with the rhythm. A few moved closer towards me and I could see the happiness on their face. Everyone was astonished and moved to tears.

I realized music could now be used as a therapy as well as help develop basic skills like listening, concentration, imitation, communication, sensory integration and so on and thus make the kids independent. My sympathy slowly gravitated towards empathy.

A beautiful poem by Mamta Saxena, articulates the cry of a differently abled child.

Can You...

Can you teach me the way I can learn?

Can you raise me with patience, love and flexibility,
for my achievements require a little more time?

Can you treat me like your other children,
neither being over protective nor being strict?

Can you understand that I have feelings too
even if I am unable to express them?

Can you embody hope within me and you
that I can live an independent life?

Can you praise each attempt of mine,

for your support is more important than the education?

Can you make others and yourself believe that I have problems,

but I am not a problem?

Can you give me a life worth living and not merely give physical care?

These powerful lines threw some insights that made my interactions effective. Through rhythm (*taal*) and melody (*sur*), I began working on developing basic skills and blended them with love and affection. I understood through my observation and experiment that regular children and special children had different kinds of learning capabilities. My experience of working as a Social Studies teacher, at regular schools for 10 years, helped me understand the difference better. A regular child uses all the five senses to achieve a balanced intellectual, social and emotional development. Special children however cannot do the same due to various reasons. Due to complications during pregnancy/birth or due to injury, some of the brain cells die or get damaged and disrupt the connectivity. As a result, there is excess burden on existing cells that cannot cope with understanding the external environment. Thus, special children experience lack of coordination and show inappropriate responses to stimuli. They cannot use their sensory organs in a functional way. These children need special support and therapy to stimulate their body and mind. This tires the children, parents and teachers and is difficult to sustain. In this context, music therapy proves to be a very pleasant, entertaining and effective way to stimulate learning processes in these children.

Music is a universal language that cuts across barriers. It calms the mind and soul and has the power to instantly change the listener's mood. Music is said to work wonders on humans, animals and on animate things as well.

Dr. Masaru Emoto, a Japanese scientist, has studied the effects of sound in water. The Emoto music studies demonstrate how certain types of sound, like classical music, generate crystalline patterns, while heavy metal music, generate distorted crystalline formations. In the images below, you see the crystalline formation resulting from water being exposed to *Mozart's Symphony* Fig (1) and then in contrast what the water crystal image looks like after being exposed to heavy metal music Fig (2).

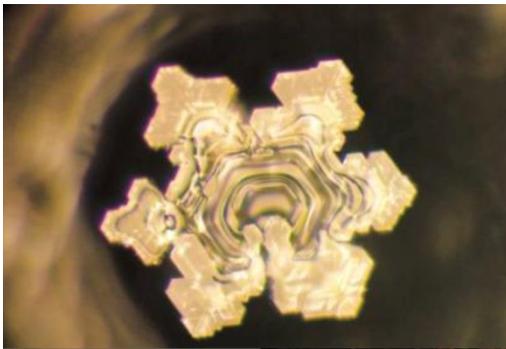


Fig (1)

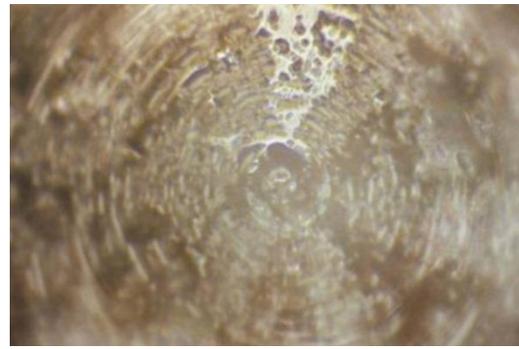


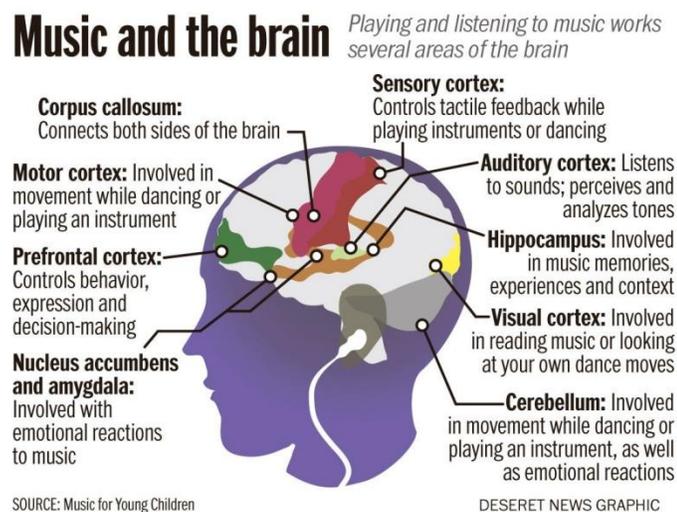
Fig (2)

This study presents a very important question: if music affects water, what impact would it have on us humans, whose brain and heart are composed of 70% water? Just imagine the wonders music therapy can do for the human brain and body.

Studies on the functioning of the human brain over past 25 to 30 years reveal that the brain is extremely sensitive to music. Music plays a very important role in the production of synapses. In the nervous system, a synapse is a structure that permits a neuron to pass an electrical or chemical signal to another neuron. Among other ways, the creative experiences that are derived out of music help in the development of synapse. The strengthening of synapse can be achieved through various brain exercises. Writing, singing or composing, playing an instrument, are

creative experiences where senses besides hearing are simultaneously involved. This particular sensory integration process plays an important role in the development of the brain.

Melody, rhythm and tempo (*sur, taal and lay*) are the three basic elements of music. The centers of these elements are located in different parts of the brain. The entire brain gets activated while singing a song, because of which various skills like listening, understanding, retaining, processing, applying and expressing, creativity, appreciating beauty, imagination - required for the physical and mental growth and development of a special child - are enhanced. This means that although the input is musical, there is a non-musical output. The diagram below explains how the various parts of our brain are activated/influenced by music.



My method involves interaction with children where they sing, dance, enact, play instruments and show expressions along with me. To give a glimpse of my method of Music Therapy, I would like to create a short musical experience and request you to participate whole heartedly without inhibitions. I would also like you to be aware of the skills and senses that get activated.

✓ **Audience Interaction Activities:**

1. Chanting of 'Omkaar' along with music on the *tanpura*
2. Prayer sung by myself – *Humko man ki shakti dena*
3. All sing together: *Hum honge kamiyaab.* (they share their experience of the singing)
4. Interactive Rhythmic Activities
 - clapping on different *taals* like 'Dadra' 'Teen Taal, Keherwa, with variations in 'lay'
 - Imitation activity with rhythm

✓ **Developing Music Therapy Modules**

The children at Navjeevan liked songs that were simple. They enjoyed the hand and body movements as well as facial expressions. I experimented with tabla and tanpura initially and moved on to use harmonium, dafli, taramine and drums. The harmonium did not allow free movement, which reduced the attention span. With dafli and taramine, my movements were free and children were attracted to the sounds, and I tried making them play too. Thus, the module was developed by trial and error.

The children also were more receptive to songs in Marathi than English nursery rhymes. I translated a few English rhymes into Marathi which were seamlessly integrated into the curriculum. The children looked happy during the sessions and parents felt they looked forward to my music therapy sessions. The children also wanted their parents to sing these rhymes and songs at home.

Impressed with my unique way of using music as a supportive tool, Mrs. Archana Joshi, Principal and Special Educator, Navjeevan, encouraged me to create a DVD so that it could reach all special children across Maharashtra. She felt this was indeed 'Music Therapy' and not merely music sessions. In 2009 I produced an audio-video DVD named 'Happu Re Happu' with 17 such songs.

I visited a number of special schools in Pune, Mumbai, Jalgaon and Latur with the intention of creating awareness about my DVD, and also to learn and understand how music therapy was conducted. I was disappointed to see children being made to sit together while a teacher played songs. The sessions neither entertained the kids nor helped in any kind of skill development. During such visits a few principals requested for a demonstration of my music therapy and they were appreciative of my interactive style. I realized my sessions were different and effective and the kids were fascinated to be a part of them. They listened, danced and a few composed their own music. With all the support and encouragement, I began streamlining my module.

Simultaneously, I educated myself by completing the following courses.

- Awareness-cum-Training Packages in disability (Mental Retardation) in 2008
- Workshop for 7 days at Pune on 'Theatre Arts in Education' conducted by Centre for cultural Resources and Training, Ministry of Culture (Govt. of India) in 2009
- Workshop on 'Psycho educational Difficulties in Children' conducted by ICON Integrated Centre for Child Neurodevelopment, Aurangabad in 2011
- Drama for Autism Certificate course conducted by VELVI, Madurai in 2012, to name a few.

These courses gave me an insight into how various forms of art could be incorporated in the training and development of special children.

Gradually, as the word of mouth spread, other institutions in Aurangabad working with children like those with autism, cerebral palsy, hearing impairment, ADHD and Downs syndrome, started inviting me to conduct music therapy sessions. I now had to customize the sessions depending on specific needs of children. For instance, I made special face masks, and used them while singing songs for children with Autism to improve their eye-contact and concentration. I wrote songs with simple and meaningful words and repetitive phrases, and sang them along with visual and tactile cues, like see, touch, feel, smell and taste actual objects (fruits etc.) to develop sensory integration.

(insert Video)

Another challenging task was conducting music therapy sessions for children with Cochlear Implant. The techniques I used for them are difficult to explain in words since they are complicated and experimental. Here is a quick demonstration and a video to help you understand.

(Insert Video).

My music therapy sessions are generally conducted in the following sequence:

- Using electronic *tanpura* to recite *Omkaar*, for improving concentration, reducing stress and anxiety, strengthening the spinal cord and the functioning of digestive system and heart.
- Reciting a prayer together, specially written by me in Marathi for these children
- Rhythm based movements – Entertainment Theory
- *Sargam* variations (vocal exercise in which the notes are used, and also provide finger practice)
- Concept based songs written and composed by self on shapes, opposites, colors, traffic rules, directions etc.
- Singing English rhymes translated into the local language for ease in understanding and relating
- Enacting the songs
- Interactive songs, question-answer in a sing-song manner to stimulate responses
- Songs specially composed by me and set to music to teach social skills and activities of daily living.

All kinds of special children benefit from these therapy sessions and I pay attention to the following aspects while conducting these sessions.

1. Maximum participation of each child: I emphasize on the participation and involvement, rather than musical accuracy of the child. To me, it is more important that the child feels happy and positive and gives spontaneous responses, like trying to clap with the rhythm, trying to sing along as much as possible etc.

2. Music with movements and expressions: I make use of exaggerated hand and body movements and facial expressions while singing, to achieve maximum concentration and response from the children.
3. Repetitive music: I sing songs that make use of repetitive words and simple tunes for improving memory and speech.
4. Rhythmic music: Since a child has an inborn ability to relate to rhythm, I always sing rhythmic songs that involves variations in *taal* and *lay*.
5. Music combined with other forms of art like drawing, craft, dance, etc: I use other forms of art along with my singing for developing imagination and clarity in concepts. e.g. while singing a song on nature, I draw a picture of mountains, trees, fruits, birds, while singing a song of a boat, I take a paper, fold it and make a boat out of it. This creates a lively atmosphere in the classroom.
6. Music combined with visuals like soft toys, cut-outs, masks, other objects to boost imagination: I make use of real fruits, vegetables, ribbons etc. along with singing, which creates excitement among children, improves their attention span and concentration, creates a fun-filled learning experience and helps in sensory integration.
7. Customized songs or songs with a personal touch like including names of the children, color of their dress, their habits etc.: This plays a very important role in boosting the self-confidence and self- esteem of these children.

(Video here)

✓ **Child Development Areas in Focus**

1. Speech
2. Communication skills

3. Motor skills
4. Cognitive skills
5. Social skills
6. Sensory integration
7. Emotional expression

(insert data)

✓ **Related Work**

Along with conducting music sessions in 8 special schools in Aurangabad, I have also conducted workshops and training sessions for groups of special educators and parents in 6 districts of Maharashtra, namely Pune, Thane, Mumbai, Latur, Nagpur and Hingoli. As mentioned earlier, in the year 2009, I produced an audio-visual DVD, one of its kind in India, in which there are 17 songs based on principles of music therapy, featuring both special and normal children, aimed at promoting inclusive education. This DVD received tremendous positive response from children with and without disability in regular and special schools. It continues to be used as part of therapy in special children all over Maharashtra.

I have offered Music Therapy sessions in the following schools Matimand Vidyalaya, Prism Autism Centre, Jai Vakeel School, Dr. Shirodkar Special School, Arambh School For Autism And Slow Learners, Yellow School For Mentally Retarded Children, Vihang Special School, Matruchalak Swyamsiddha Matimand Mulanchi Shala, Utkarsh Apang Prashikshan Sanstha, ICON Centre for assisted learning, I Progress Special Education and Therapy Center, Bal Bhavan Garware, Prism Autism Centre, Apang Bal Kalyan, Kamayani Center For Mentally Handicapped , Jai Vakeel School, Dilasa Adhar Kendra.

I have also been regularly writing articles and poems sharing my experiences as well as creating awareness in society regarding the value of music therapy in dealing with children with special needs on my Facebook page called 'Manjusha Raut: Music Therapist for Special Children'. I have a YouTube channel called 'Manjusha Raut Music Therapy' where I have uploaded videos of some of my music therapy sessions. My articles have been published in newspapers and journals such as Loksatta, Lokmat Sakhi and Umed Parivar Journal.

As the Secretary of MARG, Aurangabad, that works for the empowerment of children with disabilities, our team conducts events like exhibitions & sale of products made by special children and organizes various cultural and sports competitions to promote their skills. Picnics and workshops are conducted for teachers and parents of such children to update their knowledge and awareness in this field.

My Journey

My journey towards discovering a career in music therapy has been extremely overwhelming and enriching. Each moment spent with these children, brings a new joy, a new experience, a new challenge and puts my creativity to test. Every music therapy session is unique with spontaneous musical improvisations and keeps me on my toes. The love and affection I receive from these children is so pure and innocent and cannot be expressed in words.

Challenges

1. Lack of awareness in the society about various disabilities, their causes, symptoms and their needs.

2. Lack of awareness even among teachers and special educators about using music as a supportive therapy for skill development in special children.
3. Lack of material in the local language (Marathi) regarding use of music as a therapy for special children.
4. Financial challenges faced during producing the audio-video DVD.
5. To write customized songs and composing them using simple words, catchy tunes and, to create visual material to be used alongside.
6. Bringing variations in the music therapy in accordance with the disability to facilitate children to achieve their Individualized Education Plan.

Overcoming the Challenges

To overcome these challenges, I sought continuous feedback from people working in this field. I incorporated the feedback and relied on a trial and error method to travel this far.

Awards and Recognition

Sancheti Healthcare Academy of Sancheti Hospital, awarded the title a 'Silent Hero' for my contribution to the betterment of the society with their Creative Art Therapy Award 2018, in the category of Music Therapy. I was chosen among the many nominations from India and abroad.

More than awards and accolades, the happiest moments are when a mother reaches out to say that her child made eye-contact or spoke to her for the first time. These are precious and priceless.

A truly magical experience for me was seeing the unexpected and spontaneous response in a boy with profound retardation from Navjeevan School, in the year 2008. Until the age of 15, he had

been completely indifferent to his surroundings and people and stayed expressionless. He wouldn't move around much and was extremely overweight. He was very passive and had a very poor inner drive. After about 3 years of being exposed to my music therapy, he suddenly started dancing and jumping around happily along with other children. This transformation overwhelmed not only me but his teachers, therapists, school staff and parents alike. The parents personally thanked me for the sessions.

Another such memorable moment worth mentioning here was when a couple along with their son and a daughter with MR, visited me in May 2019. 10 years ago, in 2009, they had purchased my audio-video DVD for their daughter during a State Level Conference for Parents of Special Children Organized by Umed Parivar in Pune. Their daughter was so captivated and obsessed by all the songs, that the DVD became an inseparable part of her life. She became happier, and her tantrums reduced. She could now relate to the things in her daily life because of the concepts like shapes, colors, festivals etc. explained through the songs. She started calling me Mavshi (meaning Aunt in Marathi). The girl would be so engrossed in watching the DVD that her parents could actually leave her alone at home and go out to do their chores which was never possible until then. A couple of years later, the DVD was damaged, and the parents had to perform those songs in the same way as in the DVD. They did not know whom to contact to buy a new DVD. A casual mention of Navjeevan School on the DVD led them to me. The parents expressed their gratitude for giving the child what she truly needed and equated me to God. I consider these as my true rewards and couldn't have asked for more.

As the old Chinese thinker Lao Tzu said, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

