

THE ROLE OF MUSIC FOR ADULTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES: THE EVIDENCE BASE

Supporting Health and Social Care Professionals Across the UK



Outlining the research which underpins the evidence for music therapy as a psychosocial intervention for adults with learning disabilities, aligned with the UK Government's Transforming Care programme; giving us confidence that engaging carers in music based interventions can help them to better understand those in their care.

“ [For] people with learning disabilities... making music can mean much more than simply playing an instrument, it's about freedom, expression, aspiration and achievement. ”

Music and Adults with Learning Disabilities, Mencap, 2009



music as therapy
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The Music Therapy Evidence Base

Music therapy can be very helpful for those with learning disabilities and often focuses on the use of music as a means of communication, self-expression and interaction.

Notably, the majority of research studies evidencing the value of music therapy for people with learning disabilities focuses on children and special education. Whilst research into the role of music therapy for adults with learning disabilities does exist, this population is under-represented in the current evidence. Despite these limitations, there are examples that demonstrate the value of music therapy for those with learning disabilities:

- Developing communication, social and interpersonal skills and building relationships
- Emotional development and self-expression
- Addressing isolation non-verbally, by encouraging interaction and diffusing stress associated with interacting
- Reducing anxiety and agitation
- Contributing to, maintaining or rehabilitating functional cognitive and sensory abilities
- Increasing self-confidence and self-esteem, acceptance and success
- The expression of preferences and promotion of choice-making
- Enhancing hand-eye co-ordination and gross/fine motor skills

References: Aldridge et al (1995); Boxhill, E. H. (1984); Bunt, L. (1994); Bunt, L. & Hoskyns, S. (2002); Chester, K. et al (1999); Curtis & Mercado (2004); Daveson & Edwards (1998); Dorothea (2012); Fragkouli (2013); Gantt (2000); Gold et al (2004); Holck (2004); Hooper & Lindsay (1990); Hooper & Lindsay (1992); Hooper (2001); Hooper et al (2011); Jellison (2000); Lee & McFerran (2012); Loewy (2000); Magee & Bowen (2008); Meadows (1997); Montello & Coons (1999); Nicholls (2002); Nordoff & Robbins (1977); Ockelford et al (2002); O'Donoghue (2017); Pavlicevic et al (2013); Sacks (1995); Stalker (1998); Thomson (2018); Toolan & Coleman (1994); Watson (2007); Wigram (1993); Wigram (2000); Wilson (1991); Yang (2015)



“ Music can change the way we care. ”

Partner at The Fields
Specialist Residential Home,
Sheffield

The Current Health and Social Care Framework

NHS England's *Transforming Care Programme* instructs providers to create 'capable environments' for people with learning disabilities. The table aligns some of the benefits recorded after *Music as Therapy International* projects for adults with learning disabilities, with *Transforming Care's* recommendations:

Transforming Care recommendations	Benefits from music sessions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive social interactions• Support to establish and maintain relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Non-verbal communication• Turn-taking• Self-regulation• Emotional expression
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support for meaningful activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Participation• Enjoyment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Opportunities for choice• Encouragement of greater independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Initiating activities/interaction• Taking the lead
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Support to establish and maintain relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduced isolation• Social motivation• Improved relationships with staff and peers

Transforming Care also recommends "mindful and skilled family/carers and paid support/care staff", which is where the work of *Music as Therapy International* has a major contribution to make.

Music as Therapy International's Approach

Music as Therapy International has been delivering skill-sharing projects internationally for over twenty years. Since 2016 we have trained 65 practitioners and delivered music sessions with 158 vulnerable people in the UK, and in 2018 our approach was shortlisted for an *Advancing Healthcare Award*.

Providing introductory training to practitioners working with people with learning difficulties is important to us – especially the often neglected Adults with Learning Difficulties (ALD) which is one of our three prioritised client groups.

Drawing on the core principles of music therapy, we provide training to staff working in care settings, equipping them with new techniques to support residents on a day-to-day basis and to enhance person-centred care. This is by way of targeted musical activities which allow service users to advance toward social and emotional goals, while enhancing the quality of relationships between all participants.

The evidence overleaf illustrates the benefits of music for adults with learning disabilities and the difference our training has made for those who care for them.

Quantitative Evidence from our UK Partners

In the context of the care of adults with learning disabilities, 100% of the practitioners and managers we have worked with told us that participation in music sessions had benefitted service users:

- Non-verbal communication
- Initiating activities/interaction
- Turn-taking
- Enjoyment
- Participation

When we looked across the lifespan, our partners told us that the following benefits were particularly prevalent for adults with learning disabilities:

- Taking the lead
- Self-regulation
- Emotional expression



Reference: Music as Therapy International, UK Sustainability Review Report (2018)

Qualitative Evidence from our ALD Partners

“ Our music as therapy Friday afternoon group sessions are now firmly embedded in our timetable. We have non service users attending with their own support workers. By doing so, these people are no longer isolated and are participating in meaningful activities alongside peers. ”

Manager

“ What I get out of it is I'm really really good at listening... [and I] get to pick songs sometimes. ”

Participant with learning disabilities

“ It broadens your mind a little bit, it makes you realise that communication isn't a one way street and it doesn't have to be verbal... Each of these people has a very unique way of getting their feelings across to you and if you can just find a way for them to have an opportunity to do so then it opens up a whole other area for them. ”

Practitioner

“ The structure of the sessions has provided the mechanisms for those who often don't participate well in groups (by choice or by situation) to contribute and join others. Two of the adults can display challenging behaviour when in group settings, but during the music sessions this has moderated appreciably. ”

Practitioner

To find out more about meaningful music for your service users or to discuss training for your staff, please contact:

freyagibbs@musicastherapy.org
020 7735 3231



musicastherapy
www.musicastherapy.org