

AUTISM Advocate

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Congressman John Tierney

Raising Autism
Awareness on the Hill
As National Autism Awareness
Month Approaches, ASA Applauds
a Supportive Legislator

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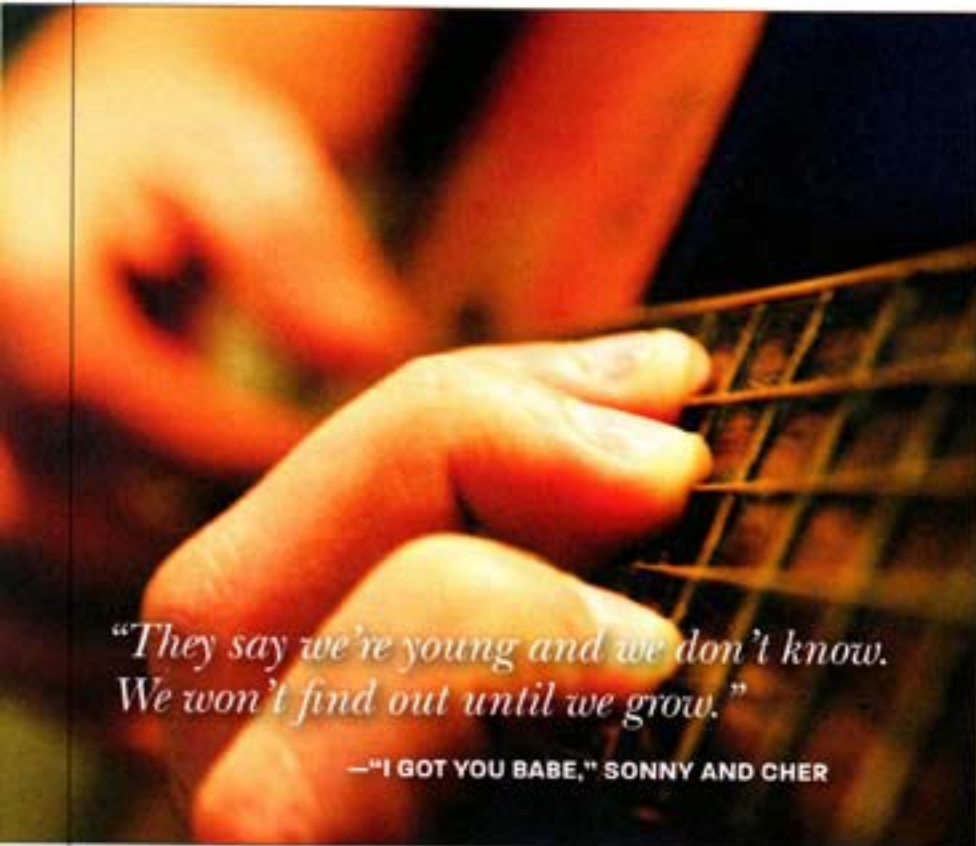


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OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES


Autism Society of America

Music to Our Ears

The Positive Effects of Music Therapy on Adults with Autism BY MICHELLE FEIGH



*"They say we're young and we don't know.
We won't find out until we grow."*

—"I GOT YOU BABE," SONNY AND CHER



THESE LYRICS ARE CERTAINLY TRUE FOR ALL OF US, BUT FOR KEN, A 42 YEAR OLD WITH AUTISM AND A CLIENT FOR THE PAST SEVEN YEARS AT OPPORTUNITY PARTNERS' KARLINS CENTER—MINNESOTA'S ONLY EMPLOYMENT-FOCUSED DAY TRAINING AND HABILITATION PROGRAM FOR ADULTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS (ASD)—THEY HAVE A SPECIAL MEANING. WITH A STAFF-TO-CLIENT RATIO OF 1:4, SERVICES AT THE KARLINS CENTER ARE INDIVIDUALIZED AND PROACTIVE. THAT'S BENEFICIAL TO KEN, BECAUSE A REACTIVE APPROACH TO HIS BEHAVIORS WOULD NEVER HAVE USED THE MUSIC OF SONNY AND CHER, HIS FAVORITE, AS A GATEWAY TO INCREASED COMMUNICATION AND SOCIALIZATION, AND TO HELPING HIM GROW.

During a typical week, Ken spends about 80 percent of his time in a separate room, isolating himself from staff and peers. Easily overwhelmed by undesired stimulation or demands, Ken would become self-injurious. Providing a room to retreat to each day alleviated much of his injurious behavior and made him feel safe, but wasn't necessarily challenging him to expand his universe.

While staff at Karlins Center understood Ken's needs and respected his choices, we were dedicated to finding a unique way for him to build on the skills he already had and even to develop new ones. That's why we applied for and received a grant from the Autism Society of Minnesota to introduce music therapy to our clients. Since the program's launch, music

therapy has positively affected communication and socialization skills for Ken and other class participants in ways we couldn't have imagined.

The Power of Music Therapy

The Autism Society of Minnesota grant provided funds for Karlins Center to host an eight-week music therapy pilot project in partnership with MacPhail Center for Music, based in Minneapolis. The program, *Music to Our Ears*, was made available to six participants, all of whom are adults with ASD. Ken was chosen to participate because he loves music. We weren't certain, however, that he would attend the classes, since conventional therapeutic programs have been unsuccessful for him in the past; but to our delight, he has willingly participated. This is because Ken doesn't feel threatened during the class, nor as though he is receiving therapy. But he is—big time.

According to the American Music Therapy Association, music therapy is a well-established health profession that uses music to address the physical, emotional, cognitive and social needs of people of all ages. Music therapy improves the quality of life for people who are well, and meets the needs of children and adults with disabilities or illnesses. Music therapy interventions can be designed to promote wellness, manage

Music therapy also has benefited Corbin, a 22 year old woman with autism, providing her with a new and meaningful opportunity to expand her communication skills and to build relationships with her peers.

As each music therapy session begins, Corbin now raises her hand and often says, "Hi," when answering Jenifer's question, "What's the first thing we do?" At the beginning of each session, Jenifer gives each participant an opportunity to strum her guitar with their fingers or a pick while she sings the "Hello" song. Corbin smiles, waits her turn, and now even sings some of the words to the song.

Corbin's primary challenge is using speech to express her basic wants and needs. Because music therapy can enable those without language to communicate, participate and express themselves nonverbally, it also assists in the development of verbal communication, speech and language skills. With Corbin, we have seen an increase in social interaction and social awareness between herself and her peers. Corbin now will look in the direction of a peer and point or state their name with minimal or no verbal cues. Corbin is using her speech more often and depending less on the staff to communicate for her.

While participating in the class, she's also enhancing fundamental skills, including auditory processing, sensory-motor,

"The music therapist, during a typical 60-minute session, touches on various forms of therapy and provides a heavy dose of socialization as well."

stress, alleviate pain, express feelings, enhance memory, improve communication and promote physical rehabilitation. Research has shown that music can positively influence the social, communication, cognitive and physical skills of individuals with ASD.

Music therapy is an all-encompassing program. The music therapist, during a typical 60-minute session, touches on various forms of therapy and provides a heavy dose of socialization as well. Since music is processed in both hemispheres of the brain, the bi-hemispheric stimulation triggers cognitive functioning, emotional responses, and verbal and physical responses. Through *Music to Our Ears*, Ken, for example, has learned the names of some of his peers, expressed feelings, taken turns and engaged in conversation. Although we know he's "working," Ken's interest is focused on whether Jenifer Josephson, the board certified music therapist who conducts our classes, is going to play Cher's greatest hits.

perceptual/motor and fine and gross motor skills. Because music provides concrete, multi-sensory stimulation (auditory, visual and tactile) and because the rhythmic component of music is very organizing for the sensory systems of individuals with autism, all these areas have improved for Corbin.

Jenifer, our music therapist, also has noted changes in the participants over the course of the program. "Overall, I have seen two very distinct and important improvements from the group as a whole. The first is an increase in social interaction and awareness of the other group members," she said. "Unlike when we started this group, clients now independently call upon their friends by name, frequently looking in the direction of a peer or pointing as they are naming a friend."

"I have also seen a direct correlation between increased peer interaction and decreased focus on staff interaction. In other words, in the past, several of the clients' first instinct when told

'pick a friend' was to choose a staff member. As peer interactions have increased, this response has decreased," she explained.

Jenifer said she also has noticed that clients are taking more responsibility for themselves. "When we started this group, I had to directly address each client by name if I wanted a response," she said. "If I wanted the clients to bring me their drums, I would have to single each out one by one, get his or her attention, and ask him or her to bring me the drum. Now, more often than not, when I ask for the drums, four or five clients will independently stand up and bring it to me."

Our pilot music therapy program ended in December 2005, but because of the data we collected and the significant results, we were able to extend the program through May. We are researching grant opportunities that will enable us to continue the program beyond May. We owe it to each of these amazing adults to make this program available.

Magical Melodies

After more than eight years of working directly with adults with ASD, I recently realized that before our partnership with MacPhail Center for Music, I had no idea what music therapy was and the many great things it can do. I've been to conferences all over the country, and rarely, if ever, is information about adults with ASD available – let alone music therapy. After seeing the positive results of our program, I feel music therapy is the hidden secret, the magical key that could open the doors for hundreds of thousands of adults with autism already in "the system."

Because music can capture and maintain attention and is highly motivating and engaging, it helps reduce negative and/or self-stimulatory responses, and increases participation in more appropriate and socially acceptable ways. Music is a natural "reinforcer," a way to help minimize undesired behaviors and allow people to maximize their potential in many areas of their lives. Unfortunately, even when we find this key, a lack of funding keeps the door locked.

With *Music to Our Ears*, we have cracked open a door, but we still have a long way to go. I challenge each of us to continue to believe in the power of life-long learning. We need to make programs like this a priority for people of all ages with ASD. We've seen the changes it has made with our adult clients in a very short time – just think of the possibilities.

If there is a downside to our program, however, it's that "I Got You Babe" plays endlessly in our heads after music classes.

I suppose it could be worse. Ken could have chosen "Bohemian Rhapsody" as his theme song—"Oh Mama Mia, Mama Mia!"

Michelle Feigh has been working with adults with ASD for over eight years. She is employed with Opportunity Partners/ Karlins Center as a service planner.

For more on Opportunity Partners/Karlins Center, please visit www.opportunitypartners.org. For more on MacPhail Center for Music, go to www.macphail.org.

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