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THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF MUSIC THERAPY

September 24, 2012 by RLSB

This week we have a guest blog post from RLSB supporter Nicola Young who spent a day at Dorton House Nursery to find out how their music therapy sessions were helping the children to improve their communication and learn more about the world around them.

How does music make you feel?

What happens to you when you hear a song that you recognise? Does it evoke memories of a perfect holiday? Does it remind you of when you were young? How about the feeling of falling in love?

The wonderful thing about music is the way that it can stir up all these emotions and affect both body and mind.

When we hear a song with an upbeat tempo it can be uplifting or exciting. Who can resist tapping their toes or drumming their fingers along to the beat?

Young children, who are without inhibitions, will automatically start to wiggle along or jump up and down if they hear a tune that inspires them. Equally, we play a different type of music if we are trying to relax and a lullaby, for example, to help send our children off to the land of dreams.

It is not surprising, then, that music is also used therapeutically to aid individuals with a wide range of conditions from Autism Spectrum Disorders to learning disabilities and physical disabilities, dementia or cancer. Music therapy, as it is known, is a recognised profession.

My visit to Dorton House Nursery

Recently I visited RLSB's Dorton House Nursery which supports blind and partially sighted babies and toddlers. The nursery offers a multisensory curriculum, with music therapy playing an important role. Not only does it benefit the children, the music therapy sessions provide an opportunity for parents and carers to drop-in and meet with other families.

The children attend these sessions once a week, run by music therapist, Iain Spink. I was lucky enough to be invited along to see firsthand how the sessions are conducted and the experience was enlightening.

I have attended pre-school music classes with my own children for years, but the music therapy session was very different. Although there was noise from all the instruments, there was a gentleness about the class which I found refreshing. Iain sings instructions to the children in a soft tone, instead of asking them to do something.

Each child is individually encouraged to pick up an instrument and make a sound, whilst the rest of the group sing along and acknowledge what they are playing. Part of the song is then to ask them to pass it on to the next person.

Iain uses only his guitar, no pre-recorded music or nursery rhymes, so although there is a structure to the sessions, this can be adapted to suit the needs of the children.

Iain says of his nursery group, "For blind and partially sighted children, music therapy is a form of communication; passing an instrument to the person next to them gives the children an awareness of others around them and introduces them to the idea of giving and sharing. The music is engaging and focusing and can have a calming effect too."



At the RLSB nursery, the music therapy sessions are an important part of the children's weekly routine. According to Iain, it is not just about the music.

"There is a tactile element to the session; from touching the instruments, to banging, tapping and shaking them. The children are encouraged to pick up an instrument and try out a new sound, which builds confidence too."

Blind children's response to music

Children respond particularly well to music. It can help them to develop early language and counting skills as well as interacting with others. Listening skills can be nurtured by encouraging children to repeat what the song is asking them to do and clapping, tapping or marching to the beat introduces a sense of rhythm. Being able to watch and copy others, as well as taking turns are all important skills for children to learn before they start school.

Mum Louise, whose three-year-old son Harvey attends the music therapy group at the nursery said:

"Harvey's listening skills and concentration have really improved since he started the music therapy. They are part of his weekly routine and he can't wait to go. Iain is great with the kids; he really engages with them. It is a joy to watch Harvey do it."

Music therapists

Music therapists work in a number of different settings, such as hospitals, care homes, day centres, hospices or specialist schools. They use a wide range of instruments, plus their voice to specifically target the emotional and/or physical needs of each individual they treat. By creating songs, singing, moving to music or just listening, individuals can learn to better communicate and express themselves. This gives them the opportunity to transfer the skills that they acquire into their everyday lives.

With the help of a music therapist patients are also able to strengthen their academic abilities, improved their concentration levels, motor control and mobility and can better manage pain, depression and aggression.

Music, clearly, has many special qualities. The next time you listen to a song, think about how you feel. If you take your child to a music group, look around you and see what they are learning. Imagine how this wonderful, yet simple, tool can benefit those who have difficulties, mentally or physically or who struggle with everyday life.

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