

# Orff Music Therapy with children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

## How to develop language acquisition and communication skills

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*Music therapy treatment has been commonly used with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Orff Music Therapy uses motivating, improvisational techniques which facilitate speech and language and develop communication skills.*

As Malloch and Trevarthen (2009) state, many studies have been carried out by respected and well-known researchers such as Stern, Papousek, Malloch and Trevarthen that demonstrate the role of music in the development of a child's self-awareness and the ability to share its experience with others. This is defined as communicative musicality within psychobiological and developmental theory of interaction.

Atypical communication and language development are one of the main criteria for diagnosis of the autism spectrum disorders – ASD, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Fifth Edition (DSM-5).

In Croatia, the importance of encouraging pre-language and early language communication is being increasingly recognized. It is important to use a natural setting with the goal of creating preconditions for speech and language development (LJUBEŠI 2012) and support communication skills. The music therapist, therefore, uses a wide variety of music in therapy sessions in order to stimulate language and communication development and to observe a child's response to music. The music therapist primarily uses live music so that variations can be made even within a single song if that will provide the optimum opportunity for the child with autism to make progress on his or her goals (KING 2004). At the root of the Orff-based model is the concept of Elemental music. Elemental music is defined as the universal tendency of human beings to make music spontaneously, using the natural rhythms of movement and speech (BRUSCIA 1987). The Orff Music Therapy provides a complete dimension of music for the child who is at the centre of the intervention (ORFF 1980).







## Speech and language impairments and communication difficulties in children with ASD

Improving communication and developing language skills should be at the core of all educational and clinical interventions with children with ASD and their families (WETHERBY / PRIZANT 1998). Many children with ASD who have learned to speak cannot use language to communicate but only use it in a mechanical way (REMSCHMIDT 2009). When they do become verbal, children with ASD have a reduced ability to achieve eye contact and to give signs for turn-taking (MC TEAR / CONTI-RAMSDEN 1992). For children with ASD where the natural manner of symbolisation as well as identity and the sense of connectedness with themselves are blocked, music therapy can offer tools for creating meaning (ROBARTS 2009). For nonverbal children with communication difficulties, music therapy can be a sustainable therapy model which supports social skills, interaction and communication using music instruments and singing (WAN 2010). Both music and language are embedded in the neuro-anatomical structures of the brain, are aural forms of communication and share the same acoustic and auditory parameters such as frequency, intensity, timbre, duration, intonation and melody, rhythm and accent (LIM 2012).

## Orff Music Therapy

The Orff Music Therapy (OMT) developed organically out of Orff-Schulwerk.

Gertrud Orff developed the theoretical foundations of the Orff Music Therapy while working practically with children. As the OMT is a child-centred form of therapy it is always important to regard the strengths of the children and their potential for development, not only the deficits caused by the disability (ORFF 1980, 1989).

Gertrud Orff used elements of the Schulwerk adapting them to and redefining them within the therapy situation. She considered four elements of Orff-Schulwerk especially suitable for working with children with developmental delays:

- the idea of musiké
- elemental music
- multisensory aspects of music
- the instrumentarium (ORFF 1980).

The goal in OMT is to support the development of the children, not to teach them music. The emphasis is focused on the development of children's social and communicative competencies in order to strengthen their self-concept (VOIGT 2013).

Speech is an essential part of Orff Schulwerk and is introduced as a rhythmic-sound quality element. In OMT speech is handled from the same basis and





is used in two ways: as a rhythmic sequence or as meditative condition. Phonetic sound is more important than semantics (ORFF 1980). The therapist can use consonants and vowels, the musical elements of language, to create a fascinating, acoustic-speech atmosphere in order to capture the child's attention (ORFF 1980, 1989), and to evoke a response from a child. Any response is welcome on various, different levels. It can be a look, a smile, a turning towards or away (ORFF 1989).

The child is interested in exploring the sound of objects, but at the same time gets the opportunity to regulate his/her sensorimotor skills. It helps him/her to find the way for self-regulation. The instruments, as sound objects, give the child the possibility:

- to take part in acoustic-active participation
- to come closer to or keep distance with the therapist
- to foster communication and get a social experience

Enabling the musical frame in the friendly music therapy setting provides the opportunity for the child to communicate in his/her unique way. Exploring, inventing and organizing musical materials in spontaneous play are important aspects of improvisation. Creativity and the ability to improvise are of utmost importance in OMT (BRUSCIA 1987).

## Conclusion

Through Orff Music Therapy children with social communication difficulties get the opportunity to collect experiences from musical structures. They can achieve self-regulation and establish relationships with others. The music therapist follows the child's impulses, vocalisation, movements, tapping and handling of the instruments in many different ways. Making improvisational music, as a nonverbal tool, it is possible to help the child to create its own expression and give her/him experiences in communication. The positive effects of music on speech and language in children with ASD have been discussed by many researchers. Some of them consider that

improvisational music can improve communicative behaviours, including speech and language.

Since music therapy has become more and more established as a profession in the last two decades, the role of the music therapist in interdisciplinary teams of specialists also becomes more important. In order to improve the quality of life of children with ASD and their families a team of specialists working in a multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary manner is necessary.



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Studium an der Musikakademie in Zagreb, 2009 Master of Science an der erziehungswissenschaftlichen Fakultät. 2012 Doktorat in Musiktherapie (Musik Improvisation als eine Form der Musiktherapie in der Frühintervention bei Kindern mit sozialen Kommunikationsschwierigkeiten). Seit 25 Jahren Klavierpädagogin und Direktorin ihrer privaten Musikschule, arbeitet als Musiktherapeutin. Präsidentin der kroatischen Orff-Schulwerk Gesellschaft.

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