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# The Power of Music Helps Kids with Autism

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**A**s a music educator and energy practitioner, I often work with children and young adults who have autism. It is indeed a soulful practice. Whether I am working with autistic kids at South Bay Arts (my studio), in schools or in summer camp settings, the power of music helps give kids the best life and the best experience possible with autism.

Autism is a complex experience that varies from person to person. Autism includes a wide spectrum of “symptoms” and how it manifests depends on the particular child. What each child needs can be very different. Some kids require a quiet, low-energy, calm environment to help them with sensory issues. Others find peace in the midst of “musical chaos” — drumming or group sing-a-longs. For each child, we are trying to find the tools that best suit them.

However, the common denominator is this — kids with autism definitely read the energy of people around them. The important thing is creating an environment where they are able to feel safe and secure enough to let out self-expression, in whatever form it takes. The way you feel about the child can make them feel safe. Your energetic feeling, your posture, your breath — it all creates a level of enthusiasm and openness.

If the practitioner directs a focused, energy-based intention in a strong and positive direction, this allows the client the space to be safe and express.

Drumming and singing are bridges between the physical aspect of the brain waves and the heartbeat and pulse. Music affects those processes in a physical way. However, consciousness is a combination of awareness and intention. This is where the metaphysical relationship comes into play, between music and autism, because the practitioner and the client become aware of each other — they develop verbal and nonverbal communication by reading each other's energy.

Musical experiences can expand someone's energy field. So the process of working with an autistic kid begins with observing their energy. When I am working with an autistic student and I see their energy field light up and expand, I think to myself, “Hey! Somebody is about to come out of their shell.” When the energy field expands, I know we are getting the right results.

No matter what client I work with and no matter what the setting, it is helpful to base our work together on a consistent foundation. This foundation is made up of breathing, confident postures, relaxation, positive experience and positive reinforcement.



With a confident posture the student might be sitting or standing. What they are really doing is grounding themselves, being in the moment, in that posture. One example of a confident posture is when a student puts their arms straight up in the air, with their fingers extended like tree branches and a smiling face. When they do this, they are no longer stuck in themselves or hiding behind a wall. We also use positive mantras (affirmations in a chant form) to help ground the student.

I would like to present two case histories of students with autism, to illustrate strategies that help them experience music.

exercises, with confident postures and breathing. I believe this helped him feel safe to try new things in the music studio environment.

I still see him every week. Now he is a rock star in group circles, singing on the mic in front of fifty people. During the process, it took time to develop a consistent flow and get him to understand what we were doing and help him feel comfortable with it. And then all of a sudden, a nonverbal kid found a voice.

### Case Number Two: Jane

Twenty-six-year-old Jane had sensory issues. She was

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### Case Number One: Josh

Josh was 22 years old and mostly nonverbal when I met him. He was verbalizing but not with coherent sentences and thoughts. Josh was a shy guy.

I thought drumming would be our starting point. But Josh was unable to accept prompting in basic rhythm patterns. Instead, we worked on the microphone and used a song Josh was familiar with: "One Call Away" by Charlie Puth. I had another young student come in and model the song for Josh by singing it. While that was happening, I played the melody on the piano.

When Josh saw the other student sing, he mimicked their singing. After a few months he began to sing it perfectly. When he was on the mic singing, his energy field was definitely expanding.

Josh was able to read well. So we used a letter system, where letters corresponded to keys on the piano. Using this technique, Josh mastered simple songs on the piano.

In every lesson, I had him do some mindfulness

very sensitive to loud sounds and had severe anxiety in groups of people. Jane was semi-verbal; she would use words, but she repeated them over and over again, and she did not always speak coherently or meaningfully. She also had a lot of general anxiety, exhibited symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder and worried constantly.

We started with chanting, singing "o, a, e, i, o" over and over again. Jane found this vocal toning soothing. It let her relax. Then we started working on the piano — quietly. Jane began to sing "You've Got a Friend in Me" from the movie "Toy Story" on the mic.

Over time, she felt safe and as she received encouragement from me and her parents, the music we played got louder and louder. However, Jane was not affected by it anymore. Soon she was playing on a loud rock drum kit and enjoying it.

Jane would also sing in drumming circles. At first, after singing, she would have to hide in another part of the studio for a few minutes and calm down. Eventually she was able to remain in the circle and continue as part of the group.



In conclusion, each day a child with special needs is like a box — you open the box and you do not know what you are going to get. So it is good if a teacher can read energy and be intuitive and creative. What we are doing is trying to create an energy-rich environment and a positive space where these kids know we care about them. They know inside and out that this is their place to thrive. 🌀



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