



Mill Water School

Music with young children: nurturing communication, life skills and learning

I worked with three groups of children with varying and profound needs in the nursery /KS1. By providing weekly music classes I hoped to show the positive impact that music has on communication, life skills (engaging together, being confident, curious and independent) and learning overall. In particular I wanted the nursery team to see music as an accessible skill, and one that helps their children to learn other subjects and skills, and not just music learning.

The outcomes in just ten weekly classes for all the children were for me, expected, and I hope, for the team, remarkable. Improved confidence together with a developing sense of curiosity, independent choices and musical learning outcomes were all notable. Comprehension and what was expected of each was evidenced; language and the links to comprehension was noted, and a sense of continued positivity extended beyond the class, to other activities. Finally, the Christmas concert shared with the families resulted in emotional responses from the parents themselves, who experienced their children voluntarily participating in a shared, creative and special performance.

Outline

Class 2 1.15pm

4 – 6 years: Sensory and non-verbal

2 non-motion based with one sight impaired. 2 non-verbal but physically active with 1 being outwardly responsive.

Class 1 1.45pm

5 – 6 year olds Sensory, non-verbal.

3 autistic boys, non-verbal. 1 autistic boy who is verbal.

Class 3 2.15pm

6 children 2 – 6 year olds.

Able group with language (some). One is non-verbal.

Sessions

I established weekly music sessions to coincide with the nursery timetable, and to maximise participation by all the children present. I used a template enjoyed by other autistic groups so as to enable a focus on particular areas, and to investigate the responses with those focuses in mind.

All the responses noted were jotted down by myself, as lead music specialist, and members of the early years team.

The welcome song

Ice-breaker, sociable and multi-sensory engagement. The hello song reflected the opportunity for children to respond through hearing, looking, sound making and touch.

Topic and sounds

In this, we sang “someone is knocking on the box” again, engaging children in multi-sensory participation, through hearing, doing, seeing (the box and the beater), and feeling. Initially offered by me (the music leader), I opened up the opportunity for a child to sing or beat “knock knock” on the box. I copied the sound of the knock – however many times the child knocked, thus, nurturing a sense of ownership. Initially resistant as the groups observed and understood the activity I noted almost 100% participation through moving, looking or vocalising. In addition to “knock, knock” the sound of “eh, eh” was for me an indicator of participatory, or active response.

- *M noticed what adults do, imitating what he saw, then did it spontaneously at other times.*

Movement and dance

This activity involved gross motor activity, moving around the space to the sound of a song and instrument (ukulele, octochime, drum, caxixi etc). The focus of this module was to encourage sociable participation in a shared space. The song “Walking in the cold” is encapsulated by four simple phrase patterns at which point everyone is still and quiet, before responding to a different instrumental sound – to encourage turning, jumping, wiggling and so on. The impact of this activity is always keenly felt during the silent moments

- *M smiling, laughing during the silent moments, then jumping*
- *S smiling and looking during the silent moments, looking at his helper, turning together.*
- *F jumping every-time she heard the octochime, watching it closely.*
- *T smiling and leaning forward as though listening. Indirectly participating despite little gross movement.*

Instruments and sound making

This module was about exploring chosen instruments, their texture, sounds, pitched notes (ukulele, cornet, guitar, agogo, xylophone) and untuned instruments (caxixi, drum, woodblock, shakers, claves). The positive impact was in evidence everywhere, particularly during the times when all the children had a ukulele to play. Notable responses including focus, looking, listening, playing along and stopping to a song, and leading the song overall.

- *S strummed the strings (normally little focus and easily distracted)*
- *T loved the cabasa – moved it with his mouth, moving the beads around*
- *R sat with his ukulele, touching and strumming (normally distracted)*
- *W explored the guitar (normally restless or asleep)*
- *Fr got a note out of the cornet. He was delighted (normally high energy, semi-focused). O watched, smiling (normally resistant to shared participation).*
- *OI played the guitar and asked for the drums (normally serious, and perhaps, non-participatory).*

- *O played the agogo in absolute time to jumping. During the ukulele playing he watched (did not play) his ukulele (on the floor in front of him) throughout the group playing. (shared participation by visual appraisal)*
- *L focused on the agogo and ukulele (normally distracted)*
- *OI chose his ukulele colour, spoke of it well, smiled during “hi ya” and seemed to let himself in (during the last two sessions – a real break through).*
- *O, F, L try to play the cornet – sociable participation and turn-taking.*
- *Tr explores his pangi shaker.*
- *H explored his ukulele.*
- *T and his group loved the ukuleles, and made choices to play them.*
- *By the end of the second half of term M would hum along to the tunes of a song. He was particularly responsive to the High and Low song, finally adopting this as his own, using his arms to insist on conducting to encourage others to go up and down on his command.*
- *M shows active interest in how instruments sound*

Reflection and recap

This module reflected on what had been achieved, and celebrated the shared moments. Sometimes I would sing a random, gentle song using a fife (a flute like instrument) together with a teddy or other soft toy to encourage a rocking motion. The notion of something special during this time was difficult to pursue as often we had to move onto the next group due to time constraint.

Farewell

The final module encapsulated and celebrated a shared moment, and its end, prior to moving onto another session. Throughout the 10 weeks the responses vocally and visually became more apparent, with increased participation in waves, looking and group engagement.

Using resources to reflect the different modules

Resources used included a box, puppets, a fish, lycra (for water), frog, frog pop up puppet and ball. The various responses that transpired included

- *T used 2 hands to throw the ball. He smiles (T has gross motor difficulties). Tr responded to turn-taking with “Yes”.*
- *L was captivated by the fish and said “fish”, collected them up, put them in the pond repeatedly, counting. L smiled, took the fish and threw it in. L smiled and made a sound. He was musically playful, gesturing in the way in for comprehension and ownership. This was a real break-through, and during the last two weeks.*
- *W, 2nd week of not sleeping throughout. He was engaged in the fish, exploring.*
- *F said “five” when I asked how many (fish) were in the water.*
- *T smiled when we sang “T.....’s fish in the water”.*
- *S was responsive to the fish song, ukulele and participated.*
- *Initially reluctant to hold or explore the ukulele, by the end of term T was smiling, reaching out to the instrument and strumming on the strings, listening to the sounds they made. He showed an active interest in how instruments sound.*

Musical outcomes

What transpired during the 10 weeks was a pattern over the first few weeks, half way, weeks 6-8, then the final 2 weeks:

Non-aware participation

Semi-aware participation

Participation and partial comprehension

Full comprehension and ownership of activity

The above related to music outcomes including:

- *Fr beats in time to the rhythm, stopping at the end of a song.*
- *F makes sounds in between the song.*
- *L and I bowed a lot to each other, indicating pitch related response. He vocalised about hi and low.*
- *S smiled on the ups and downs – indicating participation through visual recognition.*
- *R lifted his arms up and down to indicate Up and Down.*
- *L made sounds for the song.*
- *M conducted in time to the song using his arms.*
- *T engaged in sound making. L also participated in sound-making*
- *Fr translated “hi low” to climbing up and down the apparatus. He waited to be the shark in the water. (fish in the water), he was the shark. Physically translating what he knew, and vocalising this too.*
- *M sang “hi low – vocalised through the music. He laughed many times during the silent moments. He watched me closely to see when he could start again.*

The below relates to sociable outcomes as a consequence from direct musical experience and/or activity:

- *O tuned into sounds. Retreats from visual/tactile experiences but participates through sounds – evidence by slight gesture, smiles, occasional movement.*
- *L communicated through songs and was seemingly less responsive through words/instruction.*
- *Many of the children over the course of the ten weeks began to vocalise and imitate some of the words to the song. Reference is made in my notes to:*

Fish in the water

Roll the ball

Someone is knocking on the box KNOCK KNOCK!

Frog in the water

The Christmas show

The beneficiaries of this very special event included the families as well as the children. By using one of the taught songs as a main anchor for return and departure, we were able to show how music had impacted on their children’s musical engagement, learning, communication and sociable development. Sharing class-based activities is always challenging for children, particularly those with autism often uncomfortable with change, different/strange people watching, or time constraint. By using “someone is knocking on the

box” we were able to share opportunities for spontaneous response, engagement and show how the different modules captured each child in different ways.

The overall theme was about the box. We enjoyed different boxes representing different moments during a Christmas themed exploration. Songs included:

This is the way we put on our socks (socks, hats and scarves in the box)

It’s Christmas time again (instruments in the box)

Snow is falling down (snow paper cutouts in the box)

In the stable (animal puppets in the box)

We wish you a merry Christmas (more instruments in the box)

Training / CPD event

I provided an insight to how to deliver music making to young children and those with additional needs to encourage responses and learning. I encouraged participants to think about using music to empower and strengthen existing ability, rather than to reduce negative behaviour, or response. We shared practical examples, and I encouraged pair working so participants could feel and see how children might respond to a musical experience.

Overall Response

Overall the response was very good with all the early years sector participants confirming the relevance of the material and ideas to help deliver, and to see positive outcomes. They confirmed continued practice of the things learnt during the training. Less responsive were those working with older children who felt that some of the material was not as relevant. Most realised that music was so much more accessible in short bursts throughout a day, rather than being seen as a solitary activity once a day. They realised the benefit that music has on children with language delay, particularly in the context of creative musical play.

Overview

I hope that this short music study has provided sustainable and accessible ideas to support ongoing music by the early years team to their children. The huge added benefits that music provided in these classes demonstrates the need for continued investment in music, movement and other art forms to provide a continued, positive environment, enriched learning space and joyous, spontaneous moments for these children.

It would be appropriate for me to suggest that focused arts-based intervention could provide more to aid positive learning, language and life outcomes than comprehensive treatment models, and be cost-effective too. Continued, and regular training opportunities to share music as an accessible topic can include practical delivery tips, effective, cost-effective resources (boxes and socks!) and imaginative, simple and easy-to learn songs, relevant to each age group.

Observing via regular video snippets of children in musical action in addition to jotting responses through a simple monitoring sheet can do much to prioritise music as a core subject assisting with the curriculum overall. Please note, video snippets of the music sessions are all available from the head of Early Years.

Achievable objectives include communication, interpersonal, personal responsibility, play. By focus on increasing skills rather than reducing challenging behaviour, we were all able to move freely through the sessions, enable children's responses, and work from their creative benchmark, rather than our own.

Focused music intervention was adapted to meet the needs and unique abilities of each child. 'Goals for young children with ASD should mirror programming appropriate for typically developing children. Independence and social responsibility.' (Kem and Humpal).

With thanks to the Norman Trust for enabling Mill Water's nursery children to benefit from this music project.

T plays the ukulele



M conducts

