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The use of music therapy to support speech
and expressive language development for
pre-school children with special needs

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Abstract

Client-centred music therapy with individual pre-school children, involving playful but focused songs, behaviours and instrumental play, can enhance their speech and expressive language development. Four constructs were inductively created using the principles of grounded theory to represent how music therapy was used to support speech and expressive language development for pre-school children with special needs. Secondary analysis was undertaken of qualitative data drawn from usual clinical practice including clinical notes, reflective journal, audiovisual recordings, and notes from communications regarding two children from a student music therapist’s caseload at a specialist centre in New Zealand. A case vignette is presented to illustrate these four meaningful constructs of individual music therapy and concepts that constitute each are presented, along with sample quotations from the data, and are theoretically integrated within wider music therapy literature. A tree model was used to capture these findings, which further suggested ‘playfulness’ may be a central aspect of the work. Implications for my developing and future clinical practice of music therapy are discussed, along with directions indicated for future research.
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Glossary of Terms

Client-centred approach – based on Person-Centred Theory developed by Carl Rogers, this approach allows the client increased power, control and decision-making, is based on unconditional positive regard, the development of trust, and a relationship in which the client and therapist are equals.

Critical period for language acquisition – also termed a sensitive period, this involves the capacity for optimum development in the first few years of life given the abundance of neurological activity and plasticity in early childhood.

Melodic Intonation Therapy - a highly structured, repetitive technique involving sung and tapped phrases, uniquely effective in engaging the right hemisphere, priming the sensorimotor and pre-motor cortices, used with those with aphasia.

Nativism – a theory of language acquisition, proposed by Noam Chomsky in 1957, posits that children acquire language through the use of an innate language acquisition device (LAD). This contains the basic information about rules of syntax and enables children to form and test hypotheses. Evidence of cases showing that without social interaction language does not develop provides support against Nativism, and for Social-Interactionist Theory.

Neuro-linguistic theory – a theory of language acquisition, proposed by John Locke in 1997, posits four sequential neurologically based phases, based on long-term memory stores.

Object metaphor - The association of an instrument to a different object.

Onomatopoeia – a word that imitates or suggests the source of the sound that it describes, here refers to a word or vocalisation of the sound an instrument or animal makes.

Plasticity – the premise that the brain is not hard-wired but is in fact governed by competition for precious resources. In the event of injury or dysfunction in an area of the brain, neighbouring brain cells can change their function. During the critical period the cortex is very plastic and its structure can be changed with exposure to new stimuli.

Recitative - style of monody (accompanied solo song) that emphasizes and indeed imitates the rhythms and accents of spoken language, rather than melody or musical motives. A sung commentary of what is happening.

Social-Interactionist Theory – a theory of language acquisition. In 1983 Bruner proposed an innate Language Acquisition Support System (LASS) to address the
interplay between language cognition and social development, wherein evidence shows that language is embedded in the social-emotional context of the family.

Sprechstimme – inflected or heightened speech

Utterance-Acquisition System – the second phase of Locke’s Neurolinguistic theory, follows ‘Vocal learning’ and involves children’s first words and short, formulaic phrases, learned from listening to others

Utterance-Analysis System – the third phase of Locke’s Neurolinguistic theory begins at about 20 months of age and involves an internal system which acts on information learned and retained during the second phase, enabling analysis and computation of grammar and syntax

Vocal-holding technique – the music therapist can provide the vocal means for a patient to explore sound, breath and voice, thus developing the capacity for vocalisation. Diane Austin’s technique utilizes the voice of both client and therapist in grounding and mirroring within psychotherapy.

Wet voice – excess saliva resulting in a gurgly or ‘wet’ voice after swallowing

Zone of proximal development - The difference between the child’s actual development and potential development with aware and capable support. Children advance their skills best when adults adjust their level of play to that just beyond the child’s level.