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Strategies - Supporting musical skills and building on musical interests

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Introduction

Music is of considerable interest to a significant proportion of young people with visual impairment. Many of them seem to enjoy listening to and talking about music in ways that distinguish them from their sighted peers. music in some form (e.g. jingles from television advertisements, theme tunes from television programmes, current pop music and mobile phone ring-tones) is a deep interest for many young people with visual impairment who do not have autism. In fact, the fascination with sounds goes beyond music for some of them, who may develop a deep interest in non-musical sounds such as those of washing machines, microwave ovens, vacuum cleaners and even flushing toilets.

Music is particularly important to blind young people, 40% of whom have absolute pitch (more commonly known as perfect pitch). Well-developed musical ability is more common among blind young people than among those who have partial sight. Some blind young people develop remarkable musical skills, becoming excellent musicians, with the ability to play an instrument at a very high level; indeed, some play several instruments and also sing well.

Music and non-Musical sounds such as those mentioned above, are also important to many sighted autistic young people.

There is a growing body of literature on the importance of sound and music to visually impaired young people; see [Ockelford et al. \(2006\)](#) and [Ockelford and Matawa \(2009\)](#). There is also a growing awareness that music and sound is very important to some sighted autistic young people; see [Ockelford \(2013\)](#).

Given that music is so important to many young people who have visual impairment (especially blindness) and to many sighted autistic young people, it is no surprise that it is also hugely important to a large proportion of those who have both visual impairment and autism.

As shown below, some of the young people featured in the case studies in this guidance material have a clear interest in music and one of them, [Sebastian](#), not yet nine years old, is already a talented musician.

Users of this guidance material are strongly advised to do all they can to build on the interests in sound and music of the young people they support. This does not require practitioners to have well-developed musical skills themselves: the practitioners who use music with the majority of the young people featured in the case studies are not musicians; they simply use music in some way to support the young people.

Several strategies that can be used by all practitioners are described in the next section, which provides information on how music is used to support young people with visual impairment and autism.

There is also a brief section on the use of [resonance boards](#).

[Ideas for promoting further musical skills and interests](#) are provided in the last section.

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Information about how music is used to support young people who have visual impairment and autism

This section expands on the information on music that appears in the case studies, some of which is included briefly elsewhere in this guidance material. There are also references to some young people who are not featured in the case studies.

[Cecily](#) enjoys music, has a pleasant singing voice and can reproduce previously heard songs and tunes very accurately. She has been a member of the school choir in the past, and once sang a highly praised solo in a school concert.

Currently, Cecily has a deep interest in certain television programmes, focusing particularly on the music associated with them. Cecily is very sensitive to sounds and covers her ears and expresses dislike when loud sounds occur. The teaching assistant (TA) sometimes helps her to [calm down afterwards by quietly singing](#) a song Cecily likes. Cecily usually joins in after a few seconds, and the TA then stops singing. Once she appears to be sufficiently calm, the TA re-directs Cecily to her task.

Cecily's musical skills and interest are not currently being developed or used to support her in school (apart from the TA using singing as a calming strategy). Unfortunately, Cecily is no longer a member of the school choir.

Sebastian is very musical, and his interests and skills are being developed: he is learning to play the drums and piano, and often performs at school functions; he also has an excellent singing voice. In addition, he is using his skills with listening and understanding sounds to learn how to use [echo location](#). The non-musical members of his staff team [provide Sebastian with tangible rewards](#) by giving him access to a cassette recorder which enables him to pursue his interest in music and sound.

Jivan enjoys music and responds well to a daily individual interactive music session with a teaching assistant (TA) in the school's music studio when his peers have assembly. In these sessions the TA adopts an approach based on [Intensive Interaction](#). She makes a few musical instruments available. These usually include bells, at least one drum and at least one chime-bar, as these are instruments Jivan likes. Very often, the TA also includes at least one other instrument with the aim of broadening Jivan's interests. Having made the instruments available, the TA provides time for Jivan to select one. Whilst waiting for Jivan to use the instrument, the TA selects one for her own use. When Jivan uses his instrument to produce a sound, the TA responds; typically she imitates what Jivan has done. However, if the session goes well, towards the end the TA sometimes responds to Jivan by producing a sound which contrasts in some way with the sound he has produced, and she sometimes replaces the instrument she has been using with a contrasting one. In most sessions, Jivan and the TA engage in at least one brief "conversation" consisting of up to 3 turns each.

Because of his interest in, and enjoyment of music, Jivan has been taken to the opera. This may appear to have been inappropriate, given his disabilities: Jivan

- has only a very small amount of [peripheral vision](#)
- has [autism](#)
- has severe [learning difficulties](#)
- is very active
- is regarded as a "sensory seeker"; he engages in a lot of [self-stimulatory](#) activity including rocking, hand flapping, twirling and jumping; he often taps items on his head, mouth and chest.

However, Jivan sat still and (apparently) listened throughout the performance, which lasted about 80 minutes. This illustrates how powerful and how important music can be.

Winnie learns most effectively when she has [numerous short periods of work](#) rather than fewer, longer sessions. She is also provided with ["space" between educational activities](#) with periods in which she either has her favourite activity (listening to music) or a walk. Naturally, Winnie is more likely to engage in an educational activity which is intrinsically meaningful or interesting to her, but this is not always possible. On these occasions, the teaching assistant (TA) enhances her engagement in educational activities by quietly singing to her.

Winnie has a range of sensory needs. Perhaps the most difficult to manage is that she finds it hard to cope when there is a lot of noise in the classroom; it can make her very stressed / anxious. The TA therefore monitors the level of noise in the classroom. If it starts to rise, the TA calms Winnie by singing to her.

Archie really enjoys listening to music and often sings along, but has no special musical abilities. He is particularly interested in musicals. "Hairspray" is his current favourite and he will do a lot for a member of staff who sings "Motion of the ocean". Archie seems to view the singer of the song more favourably; he appears to believe that the two of them have a common interest. This seems to result in Archie being more willing to work at the request of such a person. This is used to [prepare Archie to participate in educational activities](#): if he is reluctant to participate, the practitioner supporting him sings some of "Motion of the ocean". This almost always results in Archie taking part. If he loses interest during the activity, this strategy is also used to [enhance his engagement in educational activities](#).

Amanda enjoys interacting with practitioners using song and sounds. She enjoys:

- filling in missing words when a member of staff is singing to her
- turn-taking with a familiar practitioner; Amanda and the staff member take turns to vocalise.

Singing is also used:

- as a [tangible reward](#) for good work
- to encourage Amanda to engage in sensory activities
- to support her to remain calm during [transitions of location](#)

Amanda often chooses to listen to music on her headphones during break time, which helps her to calm down in a busy environment which she sometimes finds stressful.

Todd is not featured in the case studies in this guidance material. He sometimes becomes restless during an educational task and presents as if he cannot readily engage with it. At these times the TA sings quietly to Todd. This calms him and enhances his [enhance his engagement in the educational activity](#).

The TA supporting Todd also plays classical music to him during the one to one sessions that take place on a daily basis, as she has found this has a calming effect on him.

It is worth noting that at least some young people with perfect pitch are unable to listen to or participate in music (including singing) that is out of tune. This is the case for Steven, another young person not featured in the case studies. Steven is skilled musically: he is learning to play several instruments, sings well and very much enjoys singing.

When he first became involved with Steven, Peter, one of the team supporting, him sang to him in the expectation that this would contribute to building a close relationship with Steven. However, Peter cannot sing in tune. Steven made it very clear to Peter that he did not want him to sing.

Fortunately, Peter was able to use other interests of Steven's to build a close relationship with him; he played the ring-tone on his mobile phone and jangled his car keys when Steven requested hearing them, which he did frequently. Peter responded positively to these requests of Peter's, thus [providing a responsive environment](#). Responding positively also played a crucial part in Peter building a close relationship with Steven.

Gradually, Peter began to place demands on Steven when he asked to hear his phone or keys. Peter used the ["now / next " approach](#): for example, when Steven asked to hear his phone, Peter said "OK. Now, sort these toys; next hear phone." Thus, Peter [built tasks around Steven's interests and skills](#). Peter did not use those skills and interests in the tasks themselves; rather, he used Steven's interests to provide [tangible rewards](#) for engaging in educational activities.

Thus, care may be required when using musical activities with a young person who has perfect pitch.

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Resonance boards

A resonance board is a slightly raised platform on which young people and practitioners can sit, lie, or place a hand, arm, foot or leg. The board can be tapped, or a musical instrument can be played on it. The vibrations provide additional sensory information which many young people really seem to enjoy. More information on resonance boards is provided in the [Resources section](#).

Practitioners use a resonance board during interactive sessions with some young people who have visual impairment and autism, including [Winnie](#).

Using a resonance board seems to raise Winnie's awareness of her peers, and enables her to respond. In most situations, Winnie takes no active interest in her peers. However, some of the interactive sessions in which Winnie participates take place on a resonance board and also involve one or two of her peers. Winnie has sometimes smiled when a verbal peer has said something, or when a peer has tapped on the resonance board. It should be noted that this is only an initial stage in [promoting peer relationships](#) for Winnie; for example, given that she is blind and has severe learning difficulties, it is not clear that she is aware that she is responding to a peer rather than a practitioner.

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Ideas for promoting musical skills and interests

The bulk of this guidance material describes for practitioners approaches and strategies which are being used to support young people who have visual impairment and autism. The intention is to guide practitioners in their selection of strategies and approaches; not to suggest which skills should be taught or promoted next.

However, it is recognised that non-Musical practitioners find working on music very challenging, and therefore often avoid it. Given the potential importance of music to so many young people with visual impairment and autism, this is unfortunate. This section has been included to provide non-Musicians (in particular) with some ideas about how musical skills and interests can be developed. First, some general suggestions are provided. This is followed by sub-sections on four young people; three of them (Archie, Cecily and Jivan) are described in some detail in the case studies in this guidance material; the fourth is Todd; all are referred to in [information about how music is used to support young people who have visual impairment and autism](#).

One way non-Musical practitioners can support musical young people is to arrange for specialist input; for example, schools can provide [music therapy](#) and instrumental lessons. Schools which cannot pay for these services directly can apply for funding to various [voluntary organisations](#).

There are many books on music therapy, including those by [Alvin and Warwick \(1992\)](#), [Berger \(2002\)](#), [Oldfield \(2006\)](#) and [Tomlinson et al. \(2012\)](#).

Non-Musicians in particular may be interested in the framework for working with music which is provided by Sounds of Intent; for further information, visit <http://soundsofintent.org/> and click on "About Sol" at the top of the Main Menu on the left. (Website accessed 23rd December 2014.)

Users may be interested in using a [Beam system](#).

Ideas for further promoting Archie's musical skills and interests

It may be appropriate to:

- use the songs that Archie likes for their intrinsic value; the practitioner could leave gaps, alter words, change the mood and record and respond to Archie's various reactions;
- present Archie with new songs that he is unlikely to have heard elsewhere and record and respond to Archie's various reactions;
- follow Archie's lead with songs by responding to him, rather than the other way round.

Ideas for further promoting Cecily's musical skills and interests

It may be appropriate for Cecily:

- to sing solos, perhaps with backing tracks, record them and make a CD. This could be given as a present to family members and friends. In fact, Cecily might enjoy listening to it herself, perhaps to help her calm down when stressed / anxious / over-aroused. The CD could also be sold as part of a school enterprise scheme, or during fund-raising events. Such a project could significantly enhance Cecily's self-esteem.
- to join a local singing group that sings by ear, perhaps a gospel group. It might be a good start for her just to sit in on part of a session, or sit in the next door room, and gradually build up to sitting or standing in the group. It might be wise to place Cecily next to a very accurate singer, if possible, as she will probably imitate what she hears is was.
- to play loud sounds on a variety of instruments to help her tolerate loud sounds better; gongs may be particularly useful, as, after the physical effort of making a note there is a long "reward" of reverberation. In playing herself, Cecily can decide how loud to make the sounds; she would be in control.

Ideas for using Cecily's musical interests

It may be appropriate to

- establish whether having music on in the background during educational tasks helps her to concentrate. It would be necessary to experiment with various types of music. Indeed, it may be helpful to experiment with non-Musical sounds too; some sighted autistic young people find white-noise (such as the sounds of an un-tuned radio) helpful. Care would be needed to ensure Cecily's peers were not distracted or irritated; it might be worth exploring the use of headphones.

Ideas for further promoting Jivan's musical skills and interests

It may be appropriate to

- provide opportunities for Jivan to listen to more opera, and opera extracts. If possible, this should be as part of a broad range of music heard in and out of class.
- use the assembly hall, other large rooms and outside courtyards etc, for his Intensive Interaction sessions, to judge whether Jivan responds differently to the acoustic spaces; he may really enjoy the resonance in some spaces.
- continue to offer Jivan opportunities to play a wider range of instruments; the resonance of the chime bars (the very long reward of the sound ringing on for the initial effort of hitting) suggests that he might like gongs and metal bowls.
- sing briefly to Jivan towards the end of the Intensive interaction sessions, giving him the opportunity to imitate or otherwise respond to the singing in some way.
- provide Jivan with opportunities to experiment with a Beam system.
- provide opportunities for Jivan to play his favourite instruments by himself; he may make up his own music, perhaps including singing.

Ideas for further promoting Todd's musical skills and interests

It may be appropriate to

- investigate whether different kinds of music elicit different responses in Todd; he is currently calmed by quiet singing and some recorded classical music, so it may be worth playing him other live and recorded music. For example, fast music, loud music, or music with a heavy beat or bass may stimulate him to move energetically; some music may appear to make him happy; he may respond differently to different musical instruments, and, perhaps, to non-Musical sounds.
- provide opportunities for Todd make sounds himself – to be expressive as well as receptive. This could develop into turn-taking, which would then suggest the use of Intensive Interaction.

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