

Education

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MUSIC KEEPS THEM TUNED

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Physical education, music and drawing are common extra curricular activities in a school. But, in a special school is there a need for a regular music period ? Rhythm and beat for a child who can not even write properly due to his poor hand functions ? Tunes and songs for those with poor speech ? Many children do not remember the basics in a simple lesson. How will they know or remember long songs and tunes ? Music teachers all over the world assume that children from special schools, irrespective of their age, can only sing, comprehend and appreciate very simple songs like nursery rhymes or action songs. Little or no effort is made for children to make a conscious response. Most of them are apprehensive about getting positive responses from the students and are satisfied with reactions. The melody and tempo may not be developed.

At our special schools we have included music as a part of the curriculum. Each student attends music lessons at least once every week. At the National Centre for Cerebral Palsy (NCCP) a total of one hundred students in the age group of three to sixteen years take regular music lessons. The talents and enthusiasm of students is evident from the annual concerts.

There have been many research studies on therapeutic benefits of music. The language development, improvement in speech, involvement in group activities, comprehending instructions, behaviour and concentration span have been well documented.

The objective of this article is not to document research findings about music (we have not attempted such a study !) but quite simply to disseminate information about teaching music and its tangible benefits in a special school. Teachers can then include special children in group songs along with other children of the same age and encourage them to listen to music and even play a musical instrument.

When parents and families see what their special child can achieve, they feel encouraged to involve them in family activities too !

PRELIMINARY EXPOSURE TO MUSIC

At a very young age, if a child is exposed to music he naturally gets the rhythm even if his speech is poor. In our experience, even the non-verbal children find music very soothing. Their preferences for instrumental or vocal music, special types of instruments, group or solo, light or classical, Indian or western, etc. become apparent very quickly. A trained and attentive music teacher can in fact put her finger on individual preferences.

Just like the general population the tastes of these children in music are very quickly formed. The music

teacher feels encouraged by these spontaneous and quick initial responses.

As an example, in a group of five severely disabled children, a non verbal retarded child's face always seems to light up when he hears some folk songs and drums. If abruptly interrupted, he waits in anticipation. We found that such positive response is unique for music.

BEHAVIOUR PROBLEMS

Disability is often associated with other problems. Hyperactivity, withdrawal, poor concentration span, low retention time, are some of the very common problems. Due to time management difficulties it is not possible to have individual sessions with each child. Teachers of severely hyperactive children, with low attention span, reported that these students are always better behaved after a music session. It is also interesting to note that the music teachers find unacceptable behaviour or poor attention span no problem at all. Although each and every session is in the group, even those children who are generally aloof and withdrawn sing along and actively participate in a group song.

For example take the case of a behaviourally disturbed young girl is worth reporting here. The turbulent behaviour was reflected in long spells when she would talk to herself, engage in violent actions, yell at strangers, shout and spend her energy running around. A specially organised music session never failed to work its magic. She would be completely absorbed in music, calm and well behaved. (In fact, encouraged by her

reaction to music the family is giving her home lessons too !).

IMITATION DYNAMICS

Every individual tries to sing in a distinctive style. Even when tempo is maintained the dynamic rhythmic response of each person is different. In the experience of our teachers and taking into account a sample of one hundred students each from special and normal schools, we find that disabled children imitate the style of their teacher much better than others.

From experience, it is noted that exaggerated lip movements and gestures normally used by teachers in special schools, have most positive effect on imitation. In fact, even those students with poor muscle control or those in wheel chair sway with music. The sense of achievement and pleasure after such movements to a specially composed beat are unmistakable. Simple musical instruments are specially adapted for children with special needs.

A skilled and experienced music teacher encourages the whole group to sing together, followed by solo singing while the group takes the studied form and builds the tempo. We have found that almost sixty five percent of non-articulate children can perfectly imitate the tune with good beat and rhythm.

In conclusion, we will like to report that music forms an integrated part of the curricula not only recreational but is also therapeutic benefits.

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