

Interview with Katie Harril

Creative Arts Program Supervisor/Music Therapist

I have over 23 years of extensive experience working with children with autism and other neurodiverse conditions, dedicating my career to helping them thrive and achieve their full potential. My academic journey began when I double majored in music and psychology at Allegheny College, where I developed a deep understanding of the intricate relationship between these two fields. Following my undergraduate studies, I pursued a post-graduate certification in music therapy from Duquesne University, further honing my skills and expertise.

My senior thesis was a significant milestone in my academic career, allowing me to merge my passion for psychology and music into a comprehensive study. This research assessed the impact of background music on a child's comprehension skills, and the findings were compiled into a substantial 300-page book referenced by scholars and practitioners alike.

Throughout my career, I have been fortunate to have my work published in various academic journals and books and to present my findings at numerous conferences and professional gatherings. Over 23 years ago, driven by a desire to make a meaningful impact, I founded the Creative Arts Program. This initiative was designed to serve all individuals, regardless of age, ability, or disability, providing them with opportunities to engage in creative arts and benefit from therapeutic interventions.

My commitment to this field is unwavering, and I continue to seek out new ways to support and empower neurodiverse individuals through innovative and evidence based practices.

The first steps parents should take after receiving an autism diagnosis for their child include:

1. **Educate Themselves:** Learn about autism to understand the condition better. Reliable sources include books, reputable websites, and organizations dedicated to autism research and support.

2. **Seek Support:** Join support groups for parents of children with autism. Connecting with others who have similar experiences can provide emotional support and practical advice.
3. **Consult Professionals:** Work with a team of providers, including pediatricians, neurologists, psychologists, and therapists, to develop a comprehensive care plan tailored to the child's needs.
4. **Early Intervention:** Explore early intervention programs that can provide therapy and support to address developmental challenges. Early intervention is crucial for improving outcomes.
5. **Individualized Education Plan (IEP):** If the child is of school age, collaborate with the school to develop an IEP that addresses their specific educational needs and provides appropriate accommodations.
6. **Create a Supportive Environment:** Ensure the home environment is supportive and structured, with routines that help the child feel secure and understand expectations.
7. **Advocate for Your Child:** Advocate for your child's needs in all settings, including medical, educational, and social environments. It's crucial to ensure they receive the services and support they need.
8. **Take Care of Yourself:** Remember to look after your well-being to provide the best support for your child. Seeking respite care and maintaining a support network can help manage stress.

These steps can help parents navigate the initial period after an autism diagnosis and set the stage for their child's ongoing development and well-being.

Music Therapy is a clinical and evidence-based practice in which music is used to address individuals' physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs. It involves a range of activities, such as listening to music, singing, playing instruments, and composing music, all guided by a trained music therapist.

Benefits for Children with Autism:

1. **Communication Skills:** Music therapy can enhance verbal and non-verbal

communication skills. Children with autism often find it easier to express

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themselves through music than words.

2. **Social Interaction:** Music therapy sessions often involve group activities encouraging social interaction. This helps children with autism improve their social skills and learn to work and play with others.
3. **Emotional Expression:** Music provides a safe and structured way for children to express their emotions. This can be particularly beneficial for children with autism who may struggle to articulate their feelings.
4. **Sensory Processing:** Many children with autism have sensory processing issues. Music therapy can help them manage sensory sensitivities and improve their ability to process sensory information.
5. **Behavioral Improvement:** Engaging in music therapy can lead to positive behavior changes. The structured nature of music therapy sessions can help children with autism develop better self-regulation and reduce anxiety or aggressive behaviors.
6. **Motor Skills:** Playing musical instruments and participating in rhythmic activities can improve fine and gross motor skills.
7. **Cognitive Skills:** Music therapy can enhance cognitive skills such as attention, memory, and problem-solving.

Overall, music therapy provides a unique and effective way to support the development and well-being of children with autism, helping them reach their full potential through the therapeutic use of music.

To adapt music therapy sessions to suit the individual needs and abilities of a child with autism, I first conduct a thorough assessment to understand their strengths, challenges, preferences, and goals. This personalized approach ensures that each session is tailored to meet the unique needs of the child. Here are some key ways I adapt sessions:

1. **Individualized Goals:** I set specific, measurable goals based on the child's needs, such as improving communication, social interaction, or motor skills.

2. **Preferred Music:** Incorporating the child's preferred music can increase engagement and motivation.

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3. **Structured Environment:** I create a predictable and structured session format, which helps children with autism feel secure and understand what to expect.

4. **Sensory Considerations:** I adjust the sensory environment, such as lighting and sound levels, to accommodate sensory sensitivities.

5. **Flexible Pacing:** I adapt the pace of activities based on the child's attention span and energy levels.

Typical Activities in a Music Therapy Session for an Autistic

Child 1. **Greeting Song:** A familiar song to start the session and establish a routine.

2. **Instrument Play:** Using various instruments (e.g., drums, shakers, xylophones) to develop fine and gross motor skills and to encourage self-expression.

3. **Singing:** Singing familiar songs or creating new ones to improve verbal communication and language skills.

4. **Movement to Music:** Engaging in rhythmic movements or dance to enhance motor coordination and body awareness.

5. **Listening Activities:** Listening to different types of music to support sensory processing and relaxation.

6. **Songwriting:** Creating songs together to express emotions and ideas can boost cognitive skills.

7. **Social Interaction Games:** Group activities encouraging turn-taking, sharing, and social engagement.

These activities are designed to be both enjoyable and therapeutic, holistically fostering the child's development.

In the Creative Arts Program, we do not formally collect data but regularly track

progress by assessing the individual's responses and gathering feedback from caregivers. In other programs, more formal procedures may exist, such as:

Standardized Assessments: Employing standardized tests to measure specific developmental milestones and skills.

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Behavioral Observations: Using structured observation protocols to record behaviors and interactions during therapy sessions systematically.

Using these strategies, music therapists can effectively measure and track progress, ensuring that the therapy is beneficial and aligns with the child's developmental goals.

To manage challenging behaviors that might arise during sessions, I use several strategies:

1. **Prevention:** I aim to prevent challenging behaviors by understanding each child's triggers and preferences. This involves creating a structured and predictable environment and incorporating activities that the child enjoys and finds engaging.
2. **Positive Reinforcement:** I use positive reinforcement to encourage desirable behaviors. This can include verbal praise, rewards, or preferred activities as incentives for positive behavior.
3. **Clear Expectations:** I set clear expectations and rules at the beginning of each session. Providing visual aids or schedules can help children understand what is expected of them.
4. **Redirection:** If a child begins to exhibit challenging behavior, I try to redirect their attention to a different activity or task that is more appropriate. This helps to de-escalate the situation and keep the session on track.
5. **Calming Techniques:** I incorporate calming techniques such as deep breathing exercises, sensory breaks, or quiet time with soothing music to help children regulate their emotions and behaviors.
6. **Consistent Responses:** I respond consistently to challenging behaviors, using the same strategies each time. Consistency helps children understand the consequences of their actions and learn appropriate behaviors.

7. **Collaboration with Caregivers:** I work closely with caregivers to understand the child's behavior outside of sessions and to implement consistent behavior management strategies at home and during therapy.

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8. **Professional Development:** I continuously seek training and professional development opportunities to stay current on effective behavior management techniques and interventions.

By employing these strategies, I strive to create a supportive and therapeutic environment where children can thrive and progress toward their goals.

For children who have just been diagnosed with autism, I recommend the following types of interventions or therapies:

1. **Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)** is a widely used therapy that focuses on improving specific behaviors, such as social skills, communication, and learning, through positive reinforcement.
2. **Speech Therapy** helps improve verbal and nonverbal communication skills and can be crucial for children with speech and language difficulties.
3. **Occupational Therapy (OT):** OT helps children develop the skills they need for daily living activities, such as dressing, eating, and fine motor skills. It also addresses sensory processing issues.
4. **Physical Therapy (PT):** PT helps improve motor skills, strength, and coordination, which can benefit children with physical development delays.
5. **Social Skills Training:** This involves structured activities and lessons to improve social interactions and understanding of social norms.
6. **Early Intervention Programs** are specialized programs for young children that address developmental delays and support the child and the family.
7. **Wonder Kids or Other Social Groups:** These groups provide structured social activities that encourage interaction and social development among children with autism.

8. **Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT):** PCIT focuses on improving the quality of the parent-child relationship and changing parent-child interaction patterns. It can be very effective for managing challenging behaviors and enhancing communication.

9. **Family Therapy and Support Groups:** These provide emotional support and practical advice to families, helping them navigate the challenges of raising a

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child with autism.

10. **Music Therapy** uses music to address physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs and can be particularly effective for children with autism.

11. **Behavioral Therapy** includes various approaches to help manage challenging behaviors and develop new skills.

12. **Play Therapy:** This helps children express their feelings and experiences through play, which can be particularly useful for younger children.

13. **Sensory Integration Therapy:** This focuses on helping children manage sensory sensitivities and improve their ability to process sensory information.

Each child is unique, so it's essential to tailor interventions to their needs and strengths. Working with a team of professionals to develop a comprehensive, individualized care plan can help ensure the best outcomes.

Parents can use various strategies at home to support their child's development and manage challenging behaviors:

1. **Create a Structured Environment:** Establish routines and schedules for security and predictability. Consistent routines help children understand what to expect and can reduce anxiety.

2. **Positive Reinforcement:** Use positive reinforcement to encourage desirable behaviors. This can include verbal praise, rewards, or extra playtime for displaying positive behavior.

3. **Set Clear Expectations:** Communicate rules and expectations clearly to your child. Visual aids or schedules can be helpful tools for reinforcing these

expectations.

4. **Provide Sensory Breaks:** Incorporate regular sensory breaks to help your child manage sensory sensitivities. Activities like deep pressure, swinging, or quiet time can help regulate their sensory input.
5. **Use Redirection:** If they exhibit challenging behaviors, redirect your child's attention to a different activity or task. This can help de-escalate situations and keep them engaged in appropriate activities.

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6. **Implement Calming Techniques:** Teach and use calming techniques such as deep breathing exercises, sensory tools, or quiet time with soothing music to help your child regulate their emotions.
7. **Encourage Communication:** Support and encourage your child's communication skills, whether verbal or non-verbal. Use visual aids, sign language, or communication devices if needed.
8. **Model Appropriate Behavior:** Demonstrate appropriate behavior and social interactions. Children often learn by observing and imitating adults.
9. **Collaborate with Professionals:** Work with therapists, teachers, and other professionals to implement consistent strategies at home and in different settings.
10. **Build on Strengths:** Focus on your child's strengths and interests to build confidence and motivation. Incorporate their favorite activities into learning and development opportunities.
11. **Provide Choices:** Offer choices to give your child a sense of control. This can reduce resistance and encourage cooperation.
12. **Stay Patient and Consistent:** Be patient and consistent with your approach. Behavioral changes take time; consistency is critical to helping your child learn and adapt.
13. **Seek Support:** Join support groups or connect with other parents of children with similar needs. Sharing experiences and strategies can provide valuable insights and emotional support.

By integrating these strategies, parents can create a supportive and nurturing

environment that fosters their child's development and helps manage challenging behaviors effectively.