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Music therapy does not improve autism symptoms in children, say researchers



By Sally Robertson, BSc

Aug 9 2017

Music therapy may not be of any significant benefit to children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), according to a study published in *JAMA*.



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In a large international trial of children with ASD, improvisational music therapy did not improve symptoms any more than the standard care these children usually receive.

Senior author Christian Gold (Grieg Academy Music Therapy Research Center Bergen, Norway) advises that parents should choose music therapy if they feel it would be a good match for their child, but they should not regard it as a treatment.

ASD is a developmental disorder typically characterized by difficulty communicating and interacting with others. Music therapists use music as a medium for social communication to help children create music through singing, playing and moving.

For the study, Gold and team recruited 364 children (aged 4 to 7 years) with ASD from 10 treatment centers across nine countries, between 2011 and 2015. All children received the standard care a child in their region would usually receive, but half also received improvisational music therapy.

Examples of standard care included behavioral interventions, speech therapy, the use of medication and parent counselling. The music therapy involved trained music therapists singing or playing music with each child that had been especially tailored to catch the child's attention.

After a period of five months, the children's social skills were tested using a measure called the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule. Gold and team found that a small improvement was seen in both sets of children, but that no significant difference in improvement was observed between the two groups.

"These findings do not support the use of improvisational music therapy for symptom reduction in children with autism spectrum disorder," the authors write.

For decades, experts have noted that people with ASD have a particular interest in music. Gold says it may be the case that music therapists can help children to pursue that interest and possibly learn something about social communication through that, but that the pursuit of music or music therapy should not be guided primarily by the hope of reducing core autism symptoms, because that may not be the result.

Gold believes that more research is warranted and says that efforts are already underway to improve music therapy by targeting specific skills or involving parents more, for instance.

"We should not assume that what music therapists are doing already is working well, but should try to continuously develop it further and test it," he concludes.

Sources:

- https://eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2017-08/tjnj-mtf080417.php
 - <http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2647867>
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