



Serenity
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Music

PLAYFUL INTERACTIONS AND THEIR BENEFITS

*How structured play with music
encourages social skills,
sharing, and cooperation*

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INTRODUCTION TO



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Table of Contents

Introduction	04
Chapter I: Why musical play supports social development	05
Chapter II: Structured play that builds sharing and cooperation	06
Chapter III: The therapist’s secret tool—attunement (and you can do it too)	07
Chapter IV: Practical home routines and “ready-to-use” musical games	09
Conclusion: Structured musical play can be a gentle, joyful way to practise social skills	10



INTRODUCTION TO

Playful interactions and their benefits

Play is one of the most natural ways children learn about themselves and others.

In UK music therapy practice, “playful musical interaction” is often used to build a safe therapeutic relationship, support communication, and strengthen social connection, especially for children who find spoken language, attention, or social cues challenging.

The British Association for Music Therapy (BAMT) describes music therapy as a clinical intervention delivered by HCPC-registered music therapists to support social, communication, emotional, cognitive and physical needs.

From the 2000s onwards, UK practice has increasingly emphasised relational and interaction-based approaches—often using live, responsive music-making (improvisation, shared songs, musical turn-taking) to practise the foundations of social skills: noticing, waiting, responding, leading, following, and repairing moments when things don’t go to plan.

BAMT’s Early Years information highlights the therapeutic relationship being built through live musical interaction and play.



My sessions are tailored to meet the unique needs of each child, ensuring a personalized and effective experience.

- Laura Seymour

CHAPTER 1

Why musical play supports social development

In music therapy, social development is often supported through the structure of music itself

rhythm creates predictability, turn-taking is built into musical phrases, and “start/stop” moments offer clear boundaries. Many UK services describe improvisation and “playing with sound” as a way to practise early interaction skills, like: looking, waiting, back-and-forth exchanges, and imitation, similar to early caregiver–child communication patterns.

What musical play can practise (without feeling like “work”)

- Shared attention: noticing the same sound together (“Did you hear that drum?”)
- Turn-taking: “my turn/your turn” with a clear musical cue
- Imitation: copying a rhythm, movement, or vocal sound
- Social timing: waiting, starting together, pausing together
- Cooperation: building a “team song” where everyone has a role

A simple, therapy-informed mindset

Think of the music as a friendly conversation. You offer a musical idea, the child responds, and you respond back. If it goes off track, that’s okay—music therapy approaches often treat “repair” (getting back into connection) as part of learning.

Try this at home

- (2 minutes): “Hello, then choice”
- Sing a short hello song (same tune each time).
- Offer two sound choices: “Shaker or drum?”
- Copy whatever they do for 10–20 seconds.
- Pause, smile, and wait for the next idea.



CHAPTER II

Structured play that builds sharing and cooperation

“Structured play” doesn’t mean strict. It means clear musical rules with room for freedom, a balance widely used in UK music therapy and allied child development work.

The structure helps children predict what happens next, which often reduces anxiety and supports participation.

Three music-play structures that teach social skills

- 1) Turn-taking games (sharing attention and control)
 - Use one instrument between you.
 - Add a cue like: “Ready... steady... GO!” (then STOP!)
 - Keep turns short at first (5–10 seconds).
 - Praise the waiting as much as the playing.
- 2) “Pass the sound” circle (sharing and belonging)
 - One person plays a rhythm → next person copies → then changes it.
 - If copying is hard, let them copy just one beat (“boom!”).
 - Add a supportive script: “We’re a team—your sound matters.”
- 3) “Together songs” (cooperation and group timing)

Choose songs with strong predictable cues:

 - “We start together... we stop together.”
 - Use visual cues (hands up for “ready”, hands down for “stop”).



Tips for making sharing feel safe

- Start with “shared instruments” that are easy to hand over (scarves, bells-on-ribbon, ocean drum).
- Use ‘first/then’ language: “First you, then me.”
- Keep the rhythm steady—predictability supports cooperation.
- End on success: stop while it’s going well, not when everyone is tired.

CHAPTER III

The therapist's secret tool—attunement

(and you can do it too)

Many UK music therapy approaches (including improvisational practice in organisations like Nordoff Robbins) place huge importance on attunement: matching and responding to a child's energy, timing, and communication—musically and emotionally. This is part of how the therapeutic relationship supports social engagement.

You don't need to be "musical" to be attuned. You just need to be curious and responsive.

Attunement in 4 steps (parent/carer-friendly)

1. Notice: what is the child communicating? (fast/slow, loud/quiet, still/wiggly)
2. Match: copy it briefly (same tempo or mood)
3. Name: "I hear your big drum!" / "That's a quiet sound."
4. Invite: offer a small shift: "Shall we make it slower together?"

Helpful phrases during musical play

- "I'm listening."
- "Show me your sound."
- "My turn next—then yours."
- "Let's do it together."
- "We can try again."



CHAPTER III CONTINUED

When cooperation is hard

Some children struggle with turn-taking due to sensory needs, anxiety, impulsivity, or communication differences. That doesn't mean the activity has failed. In music therapy-informed work, we often:

- reduce the demand (shorter turns, fewer rules)
- increase support (visual cues, co-playing, predictable songs)
- prioritise regulation first (calming rhythm before social goals)

Quick troubleshooting guide

- If a child won't share: start with parallel play (two instruments), then "share for 2 seconds", then build up.
- If it gets silly/chaotic: move to a steady slow beat; lower volume; shorten the task.
- If attention disappears: switch to movement + rhythm (stomp, march), then return to instruments.

Evidence note:

Reviews discussed within UK guideline surveillance have noted positive effects of music therapy on social interaction/communication in some studies, while other large trials show mixed outcomes—so it's best viewed as a supportive approach that can help many children, with outcomes varying by individual and context.



CHAPTER IV

Practical home routines and “ready-to-use” musical games

Below are simple, repeatable ideas you can rotate through the week.

The goal is to make social skills feel natural—like part of family life.

Game 1: “Copy Cat Conductor” (imitation + leadership)

- You play a 2–3 beat rhythm on knees/table.
- Child copies.
- Swap: child leads, you copy.
- Make it easier: copy movement only (tap, clap, stomp).
- Make it social: add eye contact: “Ready?” (pause) then play.

Game 2: “Musical Traffic Lights” (shared rules + impulse control)

- Green = play
- Amber = quiet sounds
- Red = stop/freeze
- Add a silly “restart” sound (triangle/bell) to re-engage positively.

Game 3: “Two-Person Band” (cooperation + shared timing)

Give each person one role:

- You: steady beat (drum/knees)
- Child: “sparkle sounds” (shaker/bells)
- Swap roles after one verse of a favourite song.

Game 4: “Pass the Beat” (sharing + group inclusion)

- At home: pass a soft object (scarf) around while you play a beat.
- When the music stops, whoever holds the scarf chooses the next instrument.

A tiny weekly plan (5–10 minutes a day)

- Mon: Hello song + choice + copy game
- Wed: Traffic lights + calm ending song
- Fri: Two-person band + “we did it!” celebration
- Sun: Pass the beat (family version)



CONCLUSION

Playful interactions and their benefits

Structured musical play can be a gentle, joyful way to practise social skills, because it blends predictable structure (rhythm, cues, turn-taking) with freedom to express (sound, movement, choice). Music therapy practice in the UK has long valued live, responsive musical interaction as a pathway into connection; supporting communication, emotional expression, and relationship-building through play.

If you take one thing from this booklet, let it be this: connection comes first. When children feel safe and understood, sharing and cooperation have room to grow, one small musical moment at a time.

If you'd like to explore this more deeply, consider discussing goals with a qualified professional or seeking a referral to an HCPC-registered music therapist for personalised support.

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