



MUSIC AS A *THERAPEUTIC TOOL*

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UNDERSTANDING HOW MUSIC CAN PROMOTE
SENSORY DEVELOPMENT AND IMPROVE
COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION TO



Music as a Therapeutic Tool



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INTRODUCTION TO

Music as a Therapeutic Tool

Music is often seen as entertainment, something enjoyable, creative, and expressive. But in therapeutic contexts, music can also be a powerful tool for regulation, connection and emotional support.

In UK practice from 2020 onwards, music therapy is recognised as a clinical, HCPC-regulated profession. It focuses on building safe therapeutic relationships through sound, improvisation, structure and shared musical experiences. The emphasis is not on performance or musical ability, but on connection, emotional safety, and individual needs.

Alongside this, the Autism Education Trust framework encourages adults to:

- Understand individual differences
- Adapt environments
- Provide predictability and structure
- Focus on strengths

When used thoughtfully, music can support all of these principles.

This booklet offers practical, music therapy-informed strategies for using music as a supportive tool at home or in care settings, whether for children, young people or adults.



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

- Laura Seymour

CHAPTER I

What Makes Music Therapeutic?

Music becomes therapeutic not because of the instrument itself, but because of how it is used.

According to UK music therapy standards, therapeutic music:

- Is person-centred
- Is responsive to the individual
- Prioritises emotional safety
- Supports communication (verbal or non-verbal)
- Adapts to sensory needs

Music offers something unique:

- It provides structure (rhythm, repetition)
- It supports expression without words
- It allows shared attention without pressure
- It can regulate arousal levels

Importantly, music therapy practice emphasises that the goal is not to “normalise” behaviour - but to support wellbeing and participation in ways that respect neurodiversity.

Reflective question:

Is the music being used to support the person — or to control behaviour?
Therapeutic use focuses on support and regulation, not compliance.



CHAPTER II

Music and Regulation

Both AET guidance and music therapy standards prioritise regulation before learning or social expectation. A dysregulated nervous system cannot access higher-level thinking or cooperation.

Music can help regulate by:

Supporting calm (down-regulation)

- Slow tempo
- Low volume
- Predictable repetition
- Gentle humming

Supporting alertness (up-regulation)

- Steady beat
- Movement-based rhythm
- Clear, structured songs

Practical Strategy: The Regulation Ladder

1. Observe current energy level
2. Match it musically (don't immediately slow it)
3. Gradually shift tempo toward desired state

For example:

If someone is highly energised, begin with faster rhythm and slowly reduce tempo.

This mirrors UK music therapy improvisation techniques where attunement comes before adjustment.



CHAPTER III

Music and Communication

Music can create a shared communication space without relying on spoken language.

Many individuals — particularly autistic people — communicate in diverse ways.

Music allows:

- Turn-taking
- Shared timing
- Imitation
- Parallel participation
- Emotional signalling

Strategy: Copy and Expand

1. Copy the individual's sound or rhythm
2. Pause
3. Add a small variation
4. Wait for response

This technique reflects relational improvisation practices used widely in British music therapy.



CHAPTER III CONTINUED

Reducing Social Pressure

AET training emphasises reducing social demand.

Music allows:

- Side-by-side interaction
- Shared listening
- Instrument play without eye contact

Connection does not need to look conventional to be meaningful.



CHAPTER IV

Embedding Therapeutic Music into Daily Life

Therapeutic music doesn't require specialist training when used in simple, safe ways.

1. Structured Transitions

Use consistent musical cues:

- Same short melody to begin
- Same closing song to finish

Predictability reduces anxiety.

2. Emotional Expression Moments

Instead of asking "How do you feel?" try:

"If that feeling had a sound, what would it be?"

Allow the sound without correcting or interpreting.

3. Movement Breaks (particularly supportive for ADHD traits)

- Marching to a steady beat
- Clapping sequences
- Call-and-response rhythms

Movement + rhythm can improve attention and body awareness.

4. Creating a Safe Sound Space

- Keep volume adjustable
- Offer headphones
- Allow opt-out
- Avoid sudden changes

Consent and choice are essential.

CONCLUSION

Music as a Therapeutic Tool

Music is not a quick fix. It is a relational tool.

When used in line with:

- Autism Education Trust principles
- British music therapy standards
- Neurodiversity-affirming practice

Music can:

- Support regulation
- Reduce anxiety
- Encourage communication
- Strengthen connection
- Promote emotional wellbeing

Small, consistent musical moments, offered with patience and attunement, can make a meaningful difference.

Above all, remember:

Connection comes before correction. Regulation comes before expectation.

If more specialist support is required, consider consulting an HCPC-registered music therapist for individualised assessment and intervention.

