



# Making music with young people on the autistic spectrum

*Practical tips for music leaders and facilitators*

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## **A. About this booklet**

This booklet was commissioned by the Sound Connections Challenging Circumstances Music Network (CCMN). It is a collection of experiential ideas, sharing approaches that I have gleaned from 16 years of consistent work with young people of all ages on the autistic spectrum in a variety of settings including schools, hospitals, youth clubs and other community venues. It has also been informed by my role as a visiting lecturer and music leadership trainer for national community music charities (including Sound Connections), music services, schools, and universities (including the Goldsmiths Community Music & Workshop Skills Certificate and the MA in Community Music at Limerick University).

It begins by reflecting upon the condition of autism, in the hope that this might prompt you, the reader, to formulate your own ideas and unique musical way of working.

If you are already an experienced practitioner, working with those on the autistic spectrum, but looking for new ideas or wanting to be reminded of old ones, you may want to skip to page 5, where the focus turns to ideas for how to put together a functional toolkit. From here there are simple but effective tips for workshop planning, as well as things to consider musically when putting together repertoire for groups. I offer ideas about how to create your own toolkit 'from the ground up' to use when working with people across the very broad autistic spectrum.

All the advice offered here has been aimed as broadly as possible at educational settings, but it may be that if you are working in a less formal youth club or community setting you will not need to be as structured in your approach, especially once your group gets to know and accept you as a trustworthy human being. There is an additional note about non-formal settings in section F, at the end of this booklet.

## **B. Ways of thinking about the autistic spectrum**

There are currently around 700,000 people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the UK (National Autistic Society 2015).

ASD is an extremely broad and varied spectrum. At one end there are people with profound autism who struggle to process, respond, or create verbal communication or speech; I refer to this state as non-verbal. This is not the same as selective-mutism, which refers to children who are able to talk comfortably in some situations but not in others (Selective Mutism Information & Research Association, SMIRA, 2015).

Within this profound section of the spectrum we might also encounter those who find it uncomfortable and almost painful to be brought into the world of people and sensory stimulation. Sight, sound, smell, taste and touch seem to be amplified and overwhelming. They may rock to and fro obsessively, possibly trying to self-regulate, or be in a state of constant agitation, flapping arms or repeating vocal sounds obsessively and anxiously.

Finding connections with young people experiencing extreme states of anxiety can be challenging for both the person on the autistic spectrum and the musical facilitator. Anxiety can be very contagious. Locating a way of creating calm within your self is very important when working in this field. Some find this calmness in meditation or yoga, others in listening to or playing music. Anything that places you in a calm or meditative state, or increases your sense of inner space, that you can successfully go to in stressful moments will be a beneficial tool if you intend to work regularly with profound autism.

As we return to considering the autistic spectrum and move along it we may encounter similar symptoms but that are experienced and displayed with less intensity. In this middle area of the spectrum someone with autism may still not be able to read your body language or emotional cues the way you would assume anyone else might. They may still be non-verbal and have problems with the intensity of the sensory world. They might behave strangely in comparison to the expectations of the 'conventional world'. When you make a joke they might take it extremely literally. If you say "Let's act frightened at the end of the ghost song" they might ask "What is frightened?". They generally do not like being in close proximity to their peers as this often presents unwelcome surprises that may cause distress. A change of routine might make an autistic young person feel like something is spiralling out of control, is frightening, or prompts them to feel anxious.

Canadian music therapist Dorita S Berger who focuses on cognitive neuroscience and behaviour-based music therapy, describes how 'fight or flight' mechanisms in the brain can affect processing in ASD to the extent that a common sneeze can be panic-inducing (Berger 2002).

All of these sensory processes, social difficulties, speech and communication confusions, as well as the need to find comfort in repetitive rituals, objects and constant reassurance or attention from others, creates learning difficulties. Sometimes these difficulties are in specific areas and not present in others. It can also create what might be seen as disruptive or challenging behaviour. How this behaviour is approached depends on your viewpoint and the viewpoint of the staff you may be working with.

Towards the end of the spectrum where behaviour appears to merge into what you might call 'normal' there are people still on the autistic spectrum, who don't display extreme or obviously autistic behaviour, but who may find the concept of empathy puzzling. They might not understand accepted social norms, appear to be in their own world, are unaware of other people's feelings, or are obsessed by their own fantasies. I have met many a non-autistic musician who fits this same description though, so it's not always easy to tell where the shift from autistic to non-autistic occurs.

By now it might be obvious that trying to pigeon hole the diagnosis and presentation of autism as one definite thing may not be the best way of approaching our work as music workshop leaders. Although we may be fascinated by how and why autism happens, no simple explanation exists.

The more we can feel comfortable with simply experiencing whatever the young people bring to the music making, the more relaxed and creative we will be as workshop leaders.

### **A note about 'structure'**

Structure is often needed in group work with autism, and even if you specialise in free improvisational groups, those with profound autism who might struggle with creative play might also initially struggle with free improvisation. With this in mind, it is important to consider how to use and apply structure. You may have to gently model musical responses initially, in order to support and create a safe and stress-free environment without being overly directional.

If you feel anxious because this all seems confusing and overwhelming then you can at least be assured that you are already empathising and becoming attuned to how those on the spectrum might feel on a regular basis.

## C. Planning your workshop

- **Some Music Leaders like to have music playing as the pupils enter the room.** I don't – I find less sensory distraction more comforting at the beginning – but this is a matter of taste. If you do use entry music try to use a similar, and therefore familiar, piece each time.
- **Remember to ask the class teacher for information about how the class has been behaving that day** – they can highlight any issues you may need to be aware of.
- **Start your workshop with the same HELLO & GOODBYE song each session.** If changing this song to welcome in a new school term, make adjustments by introducing new versions of hello and goodbye songs gradually. Give gentle notice that music is coming to an end before playing the goodbye song. This gives a preparatory warning those who may be sensitive to endings.
- **Use calming HELLO & GOODBYE songs** (for example in 3/4 or 6/8 time) for those with profound autism. The 'calm' comes from the sensitivity of the music. Don't allow yourself to get into the bad habit of ignoring dynamics just because you have a noisy or hyperactive group. In this moment you may need to play at a slower speed than the pace of body language and anxious energy presented by your pupils. This will offer them a safe place that is calm and nurturing.
- **Use a microphone** and let the group pass it along from one person to the next. Acknowledge a 'good pass' and use definite signals when someone's turn comes to an end. Utilise instruments this way too and let non-verbal pupils use the microphone as a beat box instrument by tapping it. Pupils with autism who usually avoid talking or singing often will if given a microphone.
- **Occasionally use special effects on the microphone for fun!** Use echoes, delays, FX boxes, vocoders, stomp boxes. If you have old studio style outboard gear (any special effects equipment that alters the sound of an instrument), give it a new home in your workshop. This sort of equipment is great for letting pupils mix their own voice or instrument sounds by turning knobs and touching real faders without becoming screen obsessed, which often occurs with touch screen tablets and other virtual instruments.
- **Always have a calm song or activity on hand** that can be drawn on at any time during your session to help re-focus a group that may, without you knowing, have arrived anxious from a previous event.

- Utilise **Starting and Stopping Songs** to teach a variety of fun, group working together social skills.
- **Give a prompt for silence** before the start of any activity or piece of music. This enables focus and calm for everyone. Even if your group are not capable of complete silence before the start, keep requesting it at the beginning of each piece. Repetition often works..... eventually.
- **Keep activities short** and focused. Avoid unfocused gaps that make the group wait between one activity and the next. If you can enable a seamless and relaxed flow in your workshop you will better engage pupils on the autistic spectrum. Consider this when involving music technology or switching from one activity to another.
- **During singing activities always offer interesting instrumental options** for those who do not wish to engage in vocal sound, are non-verbal, or have oral dyspraxia, (delayed speech reactions). Those who choose not to talk and don't respond to switch-based technology either (for example, Big Mack; a simple switch device that allows participants to record up to 20 seconds, and provides a focal point that encourages participants to record sounds or verbalisations). Such participants might choose a musical instrument to play as a form of communication.
- **Find ways to make choosing instruments a musical activity** so as to engage the group while allowing lots of time for others to make their choices. Try, if possible, to have two of any particularly desirable instruments and explain the concept of sharing before the activity commences to avoid upsets created by participants feeling the urge to constantly copy or have what others have.
- **Be creative with tuned instruments.** Know how to tailor them to suit all needs, from pupils with sound processing issues to those with fine motor/hand control issues. Utilise open tunings, table mount stringed instruments, create pentatonic xylophones and keyboard switches. Have free standing and hand held drum choices.
- **Always have a couple of soft foam beaters to hand** for pupils with autism who do not like the feel of drum skins or are sensitive to physically striking with the palm of their hand.
- **Use colour coded dots on piano keyboards** rather than letter-names and consider how any system used might be expanded upon to allow for progression. Remember that change often creates anxiety and confusion for those on the spectrum, so changing a system to something else halfway through may not be well received.

- **Music workshops involving young people with profound autism should not be too long.** I would recommend starting a new group by offering just 30 minutes and observing how the group reacts. You might extend this time as trust grows and also extend it by adding breaks. Always leave time for a long 'Chill zone' at the end...
- **Have a long CHILL ZONE at the end!** Before your goodbye song or activity have a peaceful relaxation time. Slow music or song in triple time such as 3/4 or with a 6/8 cyclic feel, played live with sensitive dynamics are particularly powerful relaxants. Turn lights off, allow pupils to lay on the floor. Challenge yourself to play even more slowly than you think you need to. Use sensory, shiny material to lay on or create a tent with.
- **Do not rush anything.** Try not to talk even when the piece is over. Still without talking go into a slow calm goodbye song and once it is finished maintain the atmosphere by remaining seated in **silence** for as long as possible.

## **D. General workshop tips about communication, objects & the sensory world**

- **Use communication aides or pictures showing a simple ORDER of the activities in the workshop:** using Velcro on a laminated board is a popular safe option. Do not have too many activities; just three or four sections can cover a range of activities e.g. Singing, Making Music, Chill Out and/or Music is Finished. You may find a pupil who finds it both enjoyable and helpful to remove the pictures once the relevant activity is finished. You might want to offer choices within each section too.
- **Flashing lights, buttons and switches on keyboards, tablets & electronic gadgets:** these can enthrall young people with autism, offering them a safe world with limited social interaction. Alternatively they can be extremely distracting to group and social interaction. When taken away they may cause extreme reactions. Consider how you utilise them when working with a group whose focus is listening and responding musically to each other. You might introduce them toward the end of the session.
- **Desirable objects (such as iPads, computers) and instruments (that a pupil might become obsessive about):** teachers and staff may use these desirable items as a reinforcing object, offering them to a pupil as a 'deal' if they finish other activities first. Certain schools may have strict behaviour plans - some may use a timer to let certain pupils know the activity is finished and they have to return the desirable object. At these moments behaviour may become challenging, especially when items are removed without warning or due care.
- **Be aware of allergies** for example latex (balloons), alcohol (hand cleaners or string/fret cleaners), nuts (homemade shakers that break), perfume (don't wear any).
- **Be aware of epilepsy triggers** if you want to use lights or light up instruments, for example flashing tambourines. Risk assess the effect of noise on any young people with epilepsy, for example clapping, balloons popping.
- **Avoid sudden unannounced attacking sounds:** completely avoiding 'attacking sounds' may be unrealistic, especially if you have a young person in the group who has decided that making loud sounds is their favourite way of expressing within the musical world. It may benefit everyone if you find a suitable vehicle in which to use these sounds and introduce them with suitable warning, hopefully turning them into a fun event.

- **Stimulating materials & colour:** I use shimmer organza and shiny materials in my Chill Zone but sometimes there may be a pupil who is over-stimulated by the colours, who then becomes hyperactive. Always note reactions and offer substitute sensory choices e.g. velvet or fake fur, feathers, and wriggly rubber.
- **Smells:** perfumed oils in your Chill Zone may help relax and offer sensual experience but remember not to over-do it and offer a choice if possible.
- **Neon strip lights, flickers and subliminal buzzing** can be stressful to many people, including those with autism who may be doubly sensitive to the sensory world. Find a way to minimize all outside interference as best you can.
- **Remember to communicate, in varied creative ways, when good involvement in music-making occurs:** a pupil with autism may not necessarily respond to the usual verbal 'well done' and may need more expressive fun body language to be included. If this is really not your style you might just add a Makaton-style thumbs up with the verbal communication. Young pupils might respond more to stars and stickers.
- **Always offer a choice of instruments:** with younger children or those with profound autism a choice of no more than two items may be best. You might hear teachers using one or two word instructions during these focused choice making moments, for example if you have in your hand a tambourine and a drum and show the pupil each one side by side, teachers might simply say "choose" or "tambourine OR drum?". Many people find that keeping language stripped down to its barest requirement works well with autism. It is good to be aware of and tie into the school's method of communication where possible, but also think about musical communication means that may enhance this. It could be that they respond more to a musical sound or visual communication than a verbal one during your music session with them.

## **E. Common sense repertoire and activities to support social interaction**

- **Warm-ups with movement:** when including movement in the school environment create a fun way for everyone to return to their seat at the end of the activity.
- **Start and stop songs:** collect a variety of songs that have moments where everything stops, either for an undefined time, where everyone has to wait for a music or lyric cue before they come in again *e.g. Eddie Cochrane's 'Come On Everybody'*, or songs with a definite count before everyone recommences, *for example the traditional Mississippi song 'Hambone'*.
- **Call and Response** works really well when working with people on the autistic spectrum, as they often learn by copying.
- **Find or create one chord songs to match tuned instrumentation:** to work with improvisation and turn-taking on tuned instruments.
- **Call and Response songs with funny sounds or big open vowels work well,** *for example 'Don't you just know it' by Huey piano Smith or 'Ain't Got No Home' by Clarence Frogman Henry.*
- **Songs or chants with percussion playing, especially with Call and Response, are effective:** percussion parts can be as simple or as complicated as you like as long as there is an easy, identifiable pulse or heartbeat for those who like an easy part.
- **Word syllable percussion playing:** use words the group love or use word syllables that make up useful rhythms *e.g. for children "Plum ba-na-na"* for a Cuban Habanera or basic rumba feel or use a call and response with a bit of West Side Story's "I want to be in... A-mer-i-ca" to introduce triple timings.
- **Drum & bass loops:** pass a microphone around adding sounds with or without effects.
- **Taking turns to conduct live playing** is a great way to learn about slow, fast, loud and soft, as well as pitch. When used with improvised playing it can lead to group composition.

- **Standing circle for hand clapping/body percussion activities:** to avoid your group becoming static use repertoire with a strong beat, which you keep going by stomping with your feet while facilitating - this might help hold a difficult group together *e.g. 'Handclapping Song' by The Meters* (also a fine example of a one chord song).

## **F. A reflection on non-formal community settings**

[BAM! Workshops](#) are participant-led music and performance workshops for young people with autism and learning needs that take place in community settings, with a team of music leaders independent of carers and using amplified band equipment. BAM! sessions have been running on a long-term basis, which has enabled the participants to understand how to communicate their needs including their own project designs.

Hello songs – the mainstay of beginning a workshop with younger people on the autistic spectrum – weren't successful at BAM! Participants didn't arrive simultaneously and we found it best to let participants begin playing informally as soon as they arrived, because that's what they wanted to do. This is the approach we continue to use. I mention this to point out that there are no hard and fast rules on how to work with autism, especially when you aim to enter their world rather than making them enter yours. You stay responsive and flexible in order to enable this. At BAM! this is what we try to do.

Admittedly, though, it hasn't always been easy! Sometimes, sharing is an issue, including sharing the attention of workshop leaders. We found that 'turn-taking negotiation' was the best way to get around this issue.

When you first start a new music group with people on the autistic spectrum, no matter what the setting, you will need to take time to find their way of working. Once you understand their way of working, this is what should guide you. Alongside this, though, there are reliable structures such as a simple beat or a familiar song that are excellent tools to help soothe anxiety for those with more profound autism.

Responding musically to any music-making coming from participants leads to natural improvisations. These improvisations may lead to songs, but more importantly they might lead to a sense of connecting through music, very often with someone who is unable to ever express verbally how they might be feeling.

With creative facilitation, young people on the spectrum, even those who are non-verbal, are very able to communicate the sounds, timbres, chord colours and beats they'd like behind the lyrics and melody they have imagined. They may not be able to talk about how they feel but they most certainly can make music about it.

## References:

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## Other useful resources:

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