

---

# Music Activities for EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

---

**S**ociety is changing the way it treats the disabled. Today we try emphasizing how much like "the rest of us" they are rather than accentuating their differences. In the United States this attitude is reflected in Public Law 94-142, which requires that all handicapped children be educated in the least restrictive environment.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, these students are placed in regular classrooms as much as possible, a practice called mainstreaming.<sup>2</sup>

Denominational teachers too are being asked to accommodate youngsters who have some retardation, emotional disorder, or learning or physical disability. Typically such children display characteristics such as learning difficulties; clumsy, jerky movements; inattention; trouble relating to others; or speech, hearing, and visual impairments. This article focuses on music-related activities to benefit special learners. However, these activities would help other children as well.

## Benefits of Music

What benefits does music offer in teaching handicapped children?

Many of the children classified as exceptional have difficulty "paying attention." Hammill and Bartel state that music can "promote *concentration*" because "it helps to shut out noises that otherwise might be distracting."<sup>3</sup> The teacher will have to experiment to discover what works for each individual.<sup>4</sup> Some hyperactive children work best with no music.

*Ruth Pope is an Assistant Professor in the Education Department at Atlantic Union College, South Lancaster, Massachusetts. Her responsibilities include, among other subjects, a course emphasizing techniques for teaching music in multigrade classrooms.*

Activities in which each child becomes intensely involved are the best means of capturing and holding attention. In working to increase attention span, teachers must discover a balance between using the routine and repetition many children require for mastery of material and providing variety that attracts attention and holds interest.

## Improving Coordination

Learning-disabled children often lack well-developed perceptual-motor skills such as perceiving spatial relationships, directionality, use of large and small muscles, and eye-hand coordination. "Instrumental work and other physical activities like singing-games" help learning disabled youngsters develop kinesthetic proficiency and coordination. "The Caisson Song" and many rounds can be coupled with a variety of actions involving many parts of the body.

Different sequences of movements can accompany a round:

- rhythmic arm movement of one arm, remainder of body immobile
- rhythmic movement of preferred leg, remainder of body immobile
- alternating movement of the arms, remainder of body immobile
- alternating movement of the legs, remainder of the body immobile
- alternating arm-leg movements on one side of the body, then the other side
- alternating, using one arm, then the opposite leg, followed by the other arm and its opposite leg.<sup>5</sup>

Dramatizations such as the legend of "Daniel Boone and the Bear,"<sup>6</sup> accompanied by sound effects created by children, can also be used. Youngsters like to demonstrate Peter

---

BY RUTH POPE

---

and John's race to the empty tomb, hauling in the net filled with fish, collecting the town's unfilled jars, or walking like an old man carrying a heavy load. It is helpful for pupils to work as partners, with one child mirroring the movement of the other.

Children in wheelchairs or on crutches need not be excluded from activities involving movement to music. Encourage such youngsters by including motions designed for them.<sup>7</sup>

### **Emotional Impact of Music**

Music affects the emotions; it can stimulate or calm.<sup>8</sup> By using carefully selected compositions, anxiety, anger, and hostility can be reduced.<sup>9</sup> The teacher can counteract muscular tightness caused by anxiety by having children tense a part of their bodies as a note is played and then gradually relax as the sound fades. Vigorous actions in songs and playing drums, rhythm sticks, and sandpaper blocks can help vent aggressive feelings.<sup>10</sup>

Music "gives the child a feeling of security" whether alone or in a group. "A retarded child, when left by himself, may sing a tune over and over again."<sup>11</sup>

### **Socialization Benefits**

Music can help children develop social awareness, skills, and responsibility. Pupils who have difficulty building relationships with classmates may

---

*Children in wheelchairs or on crutches need not be excluded from activities involving movement to music.*

---

benefit from songs with words and motions that model appropriate social behavior and personal hygiene—for example, saying Thank you or answering the door.

Mainstreamed children who cannot function at the same level as their age mates may gain self-confidence from being asked to lead younger children in those skills they have mastered. This will not only improve their coordination, it will also increase their self-

assurance and interpersonal skills.

Cooperation with other students to produce music is a valuable part of socialization. Every child needs to learn that in a group, each member contributes to and has a degree of responsibility for the whole. Teachers can help other students to accept the mainstreamed child by providing experiences involving positive interaction with classmates.

### **Building Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem, one aspect of emotional development, may be improved if a child has the opportunity to take private music lessons. Physical or mental disabilities do not necessarily prevent children from learning to play an instrument.<sup>12</sup> Classroom teachers may need to encourage the parents of a disabled pupil to arrange for the child to take music lessons.

### **Improving Listening Skills**

An old cliché says that children must learn to listen before they can listen to learn. Listening to music should serve a definite purpose. Sometimes the teacher may assign games that motivate and provide practice in a particular

*Continued on page 35*

# THE LEARNING-DISABLED CHILD

Continued from page 10

tudes within the classroom. Teacher attitudes toward children tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Without even realizing it, teachers sometimes use killer statements that embarrass or belittle a child. Remarks such as "You're so slow!" "You never pay attention," "How many times do I have to tell you to \_\_\_\_\_?" "Look how neatly Joni did her arithmetic paper. Why can't you make yours look like that?" make the student feel worthless, incapable, and irresponsible.

Children need a positive self-image in order to succeed. Students who have experienced failure in school already suffer from bruised egos and may feel stupid and worthless. They certainly don't need a thoughtless teacher to reinforce those negative feelings!

Teachers should be invitational to their students. This means that they view their pupils as valuable, able, and responsible. These feelings need to be unconditional and genuine and must be skillfully communicated.

Some skills that will help produce this type of atmosphere include:

1. calling each student in the classroom by name;
2. listening with care to what each student is saying (this may require perception rather than a keen sense of hearing);
3. being genuine—children can see through a facade;
4. maintaining a well-managed classroom;
5. not taking rejection personally;
6. being inviting to oneself, which means that the teacher must consider himself or herself to be worthwhile, capable, and responsible.<sup>3</sup>

Even the most competent and dedicated teacher sometimes finds that the differences between children result in certain ones making life miserable for others. This problem can be allayed if the teacher sets an example of tolerance and affirmation by treating each child with respect. In addition, the teacher can use a reward system for encouraging pupils to make honest and complimentary comments to one another.

## Conclusion

Teachers may ask themselves, When I have so many other things I am expected to do and teach, why should I work this hard for a student with learning disabilities? Perhaps Ellen G. White said it best when she wrote, "The worth of man is known only by going to Calvary. In the mystery of the cross of Christ we can place an estimate upon man."<sup>4</sup>

One of the great functions of a teacher is to give his or her students a "vision of greatness," which inevitably means making them feel worthwhile, capable, and responsible,<sup>5</sup> as well as academically competent. □

### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> T. Bryan and J. Bryan, *Understanding Learning Disabilities* (Sherman Oaks, Calif.: Alfred Publishing Co., 1978), p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> William Purkey, *Inviting School Success* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1984), pp. 56-70.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1948), vol. 2, pp. 634, 635.

<sup>5</sup> Purkey, p. 35.

## MUSIC ACTIVITIES FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

Continued from page 12

skill. A number of different activities can help polish listening skills. Many of these can be individualized to meet the needs of children with specific disabilities. (See Appendix.)

When using music, teachers should be careful to select compositions appropriate for the child's level of sensory development. "Peter and the Wolf" is more appropriate for teaching elementary students about the sounds of orchestral instruments than a Beethoven symphony.

### Music and Language Arts

Good listening skills aid the development of speech. "Even the simplest kinds of sound in speech and music may contain common properties. . . . In music, reference is made to intonation, tempo, accent, and rhythm. Speech counterparts are inflection or intonation, rate, stress, and rhythm."<sup>13</sup> One means of teaching vocal pitch, rhythm, and tempo of speech, syllabic accents, and intensity is to use chords played on

a piano. Complex versions of this activity appeal to older and/or more able students.

John A. Smith, writing in *Music Educators Journal*, describes ways music can strengthen language arts. Included are (1) using the lyrics of songs to teach vocabulary, word-identification skills, comprehension, and analytical thinking; (2) writing experience stories and setting them to music; and (3) preparing fill-in-the-blank activities in which children must rely on context and "cloze" in order to supply the missing word(s) in the line of a song.<sup>14</sup>

Special learners need extensive repetition and positive reinforcement. Basic knowledge such as Bible texts, the ABC's, math facts,<sup>15</sup> and state names<sup>16</sup> can be practiced through music. Concepts about the routes to the West can be reinforced by songs like "The Erie Canal" and "Santy Anno." The role music has played in inspiring workers and setting a rhythm for tasks can be taught by studying work songs and spirituals.<sup>17</sup>

Many books have been written about teaching special children. Study of these volumes indicates that it is especially important that teachers follow certain "steps" in the teaching/learning process<sup>18</sup> such as those summarized below:

1. Establish routines and use them consistently.
2. Structure content in easily managed "bites."
3. Keep directions simple and clear. Make sure the reading vocabulary is at the child's level.
4. Provide brief written or taped outlines and explanations.
5. Choose materials appropriate for each child's need(s), e.g., large print books.
6. Emphasize basic concepts, teaching the same concept in a number of different ways.
7. Be concrete; include visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactual stimuli.
8. Correlate materials with several subjects and with pupil interests. Utilize students' creativity.
9. Use a variety of high-interest activities within one period; include movement.
10. Carefully select music that will neither over- nor understimulate. Choose songs with "strong, definable rhythms and clear, logical melodies."<sup>19</sup>

11. Involve each child in the lesson. Make each one feel that he or she is an important member of the class!

Music provides aesthetic satisfaction, a time for socialization, an emotional release, a vehicle for refining skills and conveying knowledge, and an outlet for creativity. It can be used effectively to help educate special learners. In an atmosphere of acceptance, caring, and noncompetitiveness, coupled with realistic expectations and good teaching, each child may develop to his or her fullest potential. □

## APPENDIX

### Examples of Activities Children May Do While They Listen or After Listening to Music

1. Determine grouping of the beats.
2. Make diagrams to show the upward and downward movement of the melody.
3. Arrange colored cards in the correct sequence to identify the musical form, e.g., ABA.
4. Stand up or crouch to indicate the loudness and softness of the music.
5. Number pictures of instruments in the order that they hear them.
6. Choose from among several charts the one that correctly identifies the musical theme.
7. Draw a picture to show what the music says to them.
8. Choose one of three songs that best matches their mood.
9. Imitate the teacher's movement to music.
10. Bounce a ball or wave scarves to the rhythm of the music.
11. Act out the mood of a song after listening to it.
12. Do different types of art projects to the accompaniment of different kinds of music.
13. From a group of art works, have each child select the picture he or she thinks fits best with the music.
14. Select music to illustrate a poem or story they wrote.
15. Prepare a bulletin board to illustrate a particular musical composition.
16. Select a song that illustrates an abstract idea such as sadness, love, sharing.
17. Dramatize a particular selection.
18. Differentiate between gross sounds (timbre).
19. Determine whether a melody is conjunct or disjunct.
20. Circle pictures of the instruments as they hear them.
21. Play a rhythm instrument to the pulse of the music.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> North American Division Office of Education, *Guidelines for Working With Exceptional Students in Seventh-day Adventist Schools* (Washington, D.C.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1982), p. A-6.

<sup>2</sup> G. Phillip Cartwright, Carol A. Cartwright, and Marjorie E. Ward, *Educating Special Learners* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1984), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Donald D. Hammill and Nettie R. Bartel, *Teaching Children With Learning and Behavior Problems* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1978), p. 258.

<sup>4</sup> Earnest Siegel and Ruth F. Gold, *Educating the Learning Disabled* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1982), p. 292.

<sup>5</sup> Bryant J. Cratty, *Motor Education and the Education of Retardees* (Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1969), pp. 152-156.

<sup>6</sup> Bessie R. Swanson, *Music in the Education of Children* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1981), pp. 37, 38.

<sup>7</sup> *Adapted Physical Education for Handicapped Children and Youth* by Bryant J. Cratty (Denver: Love Publishing Co., 1980), offers suggestions for activities involving music, though some of the activities are geared to the requirements of children who are too severely handicapped to be mainstreamed.

<sup>8</sup> Bernice Wells Carlson and David R. Ginglend, *Play Activities for the Retarded Child: How to Help Him Grow and Learn Through Music, Handicraft, and Other Play Activities* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1961), p. 160.

<sup>9</sup> Siegel and Gold, p. 291.

<sup>10</sup> Hammill and Bartel, pp. 258, 259.

<sup>11</sup> Carlson and Ginglend, p. 161.

<sup>12</sup> For information about choosing musical instruments for disabled children, consult *The Guide to the Selection of Musical Instruments With Respect to Physical Ability and Disability*, available from Magna Music Baton, Inc., 10370 Page Industrial Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63132.

<sup>13</sup> Alice-Ann Darrow, "Music for the Deaf," *Music Educators Journal* (February 1985), p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> John A. Smith, "Four Music Activities to Sharpen Language Skills," *Music Educators Journal* (November 1984), p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Songs teaching mathematics have been written by Esther Mendelsohn and published by Houghton Mifflin Company textbooks.

<sup>16</sup> Ray Charles, *Fifty Nifty United States* (Delaware Water Gap, Pa.: Shawnee Press, Inc., 1969).

<sup>17</sup> John Mealing as told to John Sherrill, "The Caller," *Guideposts* (March 1986), pp. 14-17.

<sup>18</sup> Patricia Coates, "Make Mainstreaming Work," *Music Educators Journal* (November 1985), p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> Siegel and Gold, p. 293.

## SPEECH/LANGUAGE DISORDERS

*Continued from page 22*

affect language development and thus learning. Problems of verbal and written expression may mirror each other, or may occur separately. Frequently children with these problems are considered "slow learners," "unintelligent," or even "uncooperative." Many learning disabilities go hand in hand with language disabilities. Children fitting any of these descriptions should be referred for a full battery of speech and language tests.

Learning-disabled children like Bryan would most likely benefit significantly from speech/language therapy, but it would not occur to many teachers to refer them, since their speech or articulation sounds fine.

A language disorder should be diagnosed early. Reevaluation should occur regularly since early problems may not be well enough defined to meet the criterion for enrollment in therapy. As time goes on, the gap may widen between the child's language skills and those of his peers.

## Voice Production

The last category, *voice disorders*, is more prevalent than one would suppose. "Baynes surveyed 1,012 children in the first, third, and sixth grades and found that 7.1% had chronic hoarseness."<sup>9</sup> Another study indicated "general incidence of hoarseness in school children over a one-year period to be as high as 13%."<sup>10</sup>

Many such children remain unrecognized in the schools.

Classroom teacher accuracy in identifying voice disorders may be as low as 10%. . . . Comparing teacher referrals with actual voice evaluations, Diehl and Stinnett . . . found that classroom teachers were able to identify disorders with only 36.9% accuracy. Teachers and parents often overlook voice problems regarding them merely as a typical part of the maturation process.<sup>11</sup>

A large variety of voice disorder types exists. However, those occurring most frequently in school-age children include vocal nodules, inflammation or thickening of the vocal chords, hoarseness, nasality, and puberty-related pitch problems in males. These may be organic or functional in origin. Voice disorders may be related to medical problems or vocal pathology. Early identification and treatment can prevent further difficulties. A child with a suspected voice problem could be referred to a speech/language pathologist, an otolaryngologist, or even the family physician.

## Hearing Problems

Hearing impairments frequently influence speech and language development, although they must be considered a separate disorder. An estimated 3 of every 100 school children have hearing impairments.

Early identification and treatment or compensation is the key to preventing academic, social, speech, and language problems. Early in each school term every child should have a routine hearing screening administered by a qualified professional, such as an audiologist, speech/language pathologist, or nurse, with a recently calibrated portable audiometer.

First-year elementary students should have a speech and language screening from a speech/language pathologist to help identify problems early.

The results of speech and hearing tests should be included in each stu-