

Music Education for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

A RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS



SHEILA J. SCOTT

MUSIC EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN WITH AUTISM
SPECTRUM DISORDER

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*To children on the autism spectrum who guide us to observe, to listen,
and to teach in new ways.*

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Preface

THIS IS A resource book for teachers working with children on the autism spectrum in the approximate age range of 4 to 9. My experiences teaching children with ASD began with a request from a local teacher. She noticed that her students with ASD responded positively to music. She tried to communicate with these students through music but, since she was not a musician or a music teacher, did not feel qualified for this task. Would I develop and deliver a music program for these students? I was excited by this possibility but also naïve. I assumed that all I had to do was consult some published resources, compile their recommendations, and build a program. I soon learned that these resources did not exist.

This publication represents my search for activities with which to create a music program for these children. My educational preparation in both the Kodaly Method and the Orff Approach, my background as an elementary-level music teacher, and my current position teaching courses in general music methods to pre-service educators provided a wealth of experiences to draw on in creating a music program for children with ASD. Over the next several years I worked (and continue to work) with children with autism on a weekly basis, experimenting with a variety of educational strategies, revising approaches, and assessing whether these interventions were successful with these students. All of the materials and activities described in this book were field tested in this program.

My starting point in planning music-based activities for children with ASD was to examine the research literature highlighting the challenges experienced by children

with ASD and describing the difficulties they encounter in managing their behaviors in typical school environments. Explanations of these research findings inform the educational strategies described in this book.

Many of the activities in this publication are similar to those already used by teachers. However, this book differs from other resources in that activities are situated in relation to children with ASD. This helps teachers understand how these students learn and, through this understanding, helps students on the autism spectrum reach their full potentials. Readers gain a repertoire of activities to use in their classrooms. They also gain insights into how children on the autism spectrum behave and how teachers may structure educational environments to help these children manage their behaviors. While the educational interventions described in this publication are geared to students in preschool (approximately ages 4 or 5) through grade 3 (approximately ages 8 or 9), the activities in this resource may be adapted for older students.

Many educators work with students with ASD. Some of these students are grouped alongside their typically developing peers in inclusive environments; others receive instruction, or a portion of their instruction, in programs developed exclusively for children with exceptional cognitive, behavioral, and/or psychomotor needs. Many educators are challenged to create educational environments that provide all individuals with educational opportunities best suited to their needs. These teachers may observe that, in general, students on the autism spectrum display an affinity to music. Building on these natural inclinations, educators open doors to social interaction as students engage with others in music-based experiences. Children respond to music in a variety of ways. Their responses involve cognition when children perform the beat and subdivisions of the beat on drums. Their responses involve creativity when students improvise movements to express their aural experiences. Their responses involve communication when children and caregivers interact through performance.

This publication may be used by a variety of educational professionals and for a variety of purposes. Both pre-service and in-service music teachers may use this book to help to prepare music programs for this group of students or to find ways to differentiate music instruction for individuals with ASD. Generalist educators may use this book to find activities that will motivate their students toward joint attention and increased interaction within educational environments and with individuals (teachers, instructional assistants, and peers) within these environments.

The following summary provides an overview of the seven chapters in this book. Chapter 1, *Autism and Music Education*, provides an overview of autism and advice on structuring educational environments to maximize learning for students on the spectrum. In Chapter 2, *Planning for Instruction*, teachers gain information about

differentiated instruction and creating lesson plans around the principles of Universal Design. Chapter 3, *Songs and Singing*, begins with a review of research that profiles pitch perception for memory, discrimination, and reproduction in individuals with ASD, followed by a series of practical teaching interventions that assist teachers in engaging students with ASD through songs and singing. In Chapter 4, *Listening to Music*, music listening is explored as an avenue for promoting receptivity, joint attention, relaxation, and sensory stimulation among children with ASD and their caregivers, concluding with descriptions of educational interventions that motivate students to explore expressive qualities of music such as dynamics and tempo. Chapter 5, *Moving*, begins with an overview of research literature that profiles the challenges encountered by children with ASD in motor development. This is followed by a summary of the benefits of movement interventions and descriptions of teaching strategies that help children on the autism spectrum practice and refine proficiencies in movement. In Chapter 6, *Playing Musical Instruments*, the benefits students receive through playing instruments are reviewed including descriptions of the percussion instruments referred to throughout this resource, and explanations of factors to consider when choosing instruments for particular tasks and for particular students. This is followed by guidelines for introducing percussion instruments to students with ASD and descriptions of educational interventions that facilitate the use of percussion instruments with these students. In Chapter 7, *Musical Narratives*, storytelling and drama are used to integrate the music activities described in earlier chapters (e.g., singing, moving, listening, and playing instruments) into holistic musical experiences. Additional educational interventions are posted on the companion website, along with audio files of the songs notated in the book and an annotated bibliography of picture books based on songs. Updates of research findings, along with suggested implications for education, are also posted. As a whole, this resource provides teachers with comprehensive perspectives for engaging children with ASD in hands-on activities through music.

Working with students with ASD requires that teachers carefully observe and respond to the students' reactions to their educational environments. As I interact with teachers I realize that many of them are challenged to find ways to involve students with ASD in their classes. They want to offer these students the best education possible, but are unsure of how to do so. I hope that the work I share helps educators on their personal journeys, creating and recreating educational contexts for their students.

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About the Companion Website

WWW.OUP.COM/US/MUSICEDUCATIONFORCHILDRENWITHASD

Readers are invited to explore materials that accompany this book in the companion website. This book is suited to educators with varying backgrounds including, but not limited to, specialist music teachers, special education teachers, and educators in general classroom situations. The website is designed with this in mind by including materials for educators with limited formal education in music as well as for those with extensive backgrounds as music performers and/or music educators. The website includes the following features:

- Updates of the research literature with implications for how students with ASD learn through music
- Aural files of vocal performances of all songs shown in the text in traditional music notation
- Annotated references for picture books that represent songs
- Aural files of rhythm patterns for the movement games described in chapter 5
- Examples of musical narratives to illustrate further the ideas presented in Chapter 7 of this book

References to materials in the Companion Website are highlighted throughout the text using the symbol shown to the right. ►

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