

One Song, Many Ways to Connect with Special Needs

By David MEYERS



Ever hear someone humming a tune and the next thing you know it's stuck in your head for the rest of the day? Music has a flow that humans innately relate to. We can't help it.

We can be focused on writing an article for a magazine, but if there's music on in the background, we involuntarily tap our feet or bob our heads as we stare at the computer screen. Music, especially with catchy melodies and rhythms, create feelings we all easily connect with on conscious and subconscious levels. Once that connection happens, there is a universal human joy in sharing this feeling.

As a music instructor specializing in teaching students on the autism spectrum, I use our natural affinities for music to compel responses and social awareness. The rhythm, melody, and lyrics of a song act like an escalator guiding the response to the right level. Once that platform is reached, and confidence builds, amazing things happen. Let me give you an example of how I apply one musical composition to coerce a response in movement, voice, and group awareness.

The foundation of this exercise goes way back to the 1950s Bo Diddley tune *Who Do You Love?* The

"Bo Diddley Beat" is one of those natural, responsive rhythms. The slight interval after the main beat, "BumPa BumPa Bumm," allows for a strong "Bamm Boom" response. Get drums for yourself and your student and give it a try. No drums? It's okay to use a desk top, table, or shaker instrument. The beat is hit at each B and P in the progression while the "BumPa Bum..." is called out.

Main Beat (5 beats)	Response Beat (2 beats)
BumPa BumPa Bumm	Bamm Boom
BumPa BumPa Bumm	Bamm Boom

At first, the instructor introduces the pattern and plays both beats, accenting the response beat on the student's drum to prompt him/her. After a few tries, the instructor plays "BumPa BumPa Bumm" with an accented stop. Most students will feel the music interval and fill the rhythm space with the response "Bamm Boom."

This is just the beginning. Use the movement of drum beats to cue a verbal response within the narrative of the song.

Here's what I'm talking about: Sing the lyrics "Who Do You Love?" Prompt the student to respond, "MY MOM," and play the "Bamm Boom" beat. It's the student's job to call out, "MY MOM," over the response beat.

Instructor	Student
Main Beat	Response Beat
BumPa BumPa Bumm	Bamm Boom
"WHO DO YOU LOVE"	"MY MOM"
"WHO DO YOU LOVE"	"MY MOM"

I then liven things up with my guitar, add some words about the child's loved ones, and prompt the child to keep his/her beat.

Instructor	Student
"In morning I wake up"	Bamm Boom
"She's there to give me hugs"	Bamm Boom
"She tucks me in at night"	Bamm Boom
"She makes me feel all right"	Bamm Boom
"WHO DO YOU LOVE"	"MY MOM"
"WHO DO YOU LOVE"	"MY MOM"

The verses to the song can be rhythmically spoken, so there are no melodic challenges. Its lyrical theme is universal for kids to relate to. The song provides a path for the student to call out and express feelings for family members. The singing helps reinforce the drum beat, as "MY MOM" has two distinct beats and then a stop. It is not unusual for the instructor to stop and wait, compelling the student to call out his/her line at the right time.

This concept can allow the students to get involved in the creative process. Ask them about other people

or things they love. "Could it be your father or sister? How about your pet or a toy? What's your favorite book or cartoon character?" Anything that gets the child motivated. Let's say the student says he loves his dog, Barker. "What do you love about Barker? When he licks your face? Is it because he is warm and furry and has a wet nose?" Write down four ideas and call them out in the song.

Instructor & Student	Student
He's so warm and furry	Bamm Boom
and likes to lick my face	Bamm Boom
He's got a wet black nose	Bamm Boom
and runs all over the place	Bamm Boom
WHO DO YOU LOVE	BAR KER
WHO DO YOU LOVE	BAR KER

Even students who nod responses will recognize their personal contributions and be more likely to call out their own words about their pets. If the student is comfortable with the process, make a list of things we love about Barker, and when we sing, "WHO DO YOU LOVE," call out the student's name, "JOEY" for example.

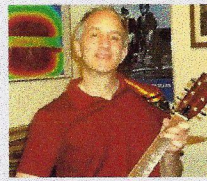
We can build on this momentum and use the musical process for greater social awareness. The simplicity of beginning and ending a composition together is an exercise in social relation. First, explain the procedure of beginning the song together.

"Let's play the song together again.
I am going to ask you if you are ready.
Then I am going to count to four, 1, 2, 3, 4.
Then we start, Bumpa Bumpa Bumm.
So it's 1, 2, 3, 4, Bumpa Bumpa Bumm.
Are you ready?"

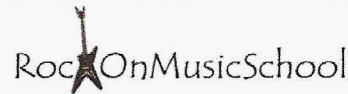
Accenting the four is a good cue to begin. With a bit of practice, the teacher and student are connecting as the song begins. Make sure the student knows if you mess up, it's okay to start again.

In one simple song composition, we accomplished a lot. We provided an opportunity for timed movement, verbal responses, creative input, and social integration. So end it on a high note with a fun, "rock concert" good-bye. The singer calls out a "YEAAAAAH!" while the instruments play wildly until a final beat is struck. I find it amazing how my students universally recognize this rise in energy and release it together on their instruments. When the instructor stops, his/her release often subsides instantaneously. These moments seem like musical dysfunction, but actually, create a bond between players as they learn to rise and stop together. So we end with a smile and all feel like rock stars. "YEAAAAAH!"

MY first goal is for children with ASD to build confidence knowing they can contribute to music. Music allows them to get comfortable with their own voices, movements, creativity, and group participation. The desire to contribute to music is usually already there. The instructor only helps unlock the innate ability by making music fun and rewarding.

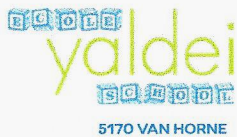


David Meyers has written more than 100 songs, many of which are designed specifically for music learning. His unique brand of teaching includes Dave's Ten Terrific Tunes which often can be played on the first day of lessons. David currently provides special needs music lessons in clients' homes in the Westchester County, NY, area and at the Pied Piper Youth Theatre in Stormville, NY.



He is also a music specialist for SPARC, Recreation and Therapeutic Services in Yorktown Heights, NY. David is a contributing member of the Children's Music Network. Check out some of his songs on his website.

Website: RockonMusicSchool.com



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