

How to Use Music As a Tool to Gain Attention With Autism

By David MEYERS

It is Thursday. I am about to meet a new child on the autism spectrum. My goal is to teach basic music skills and use these skills to build confidence, improve fine motor movement, and prompt timely responses. To achieve this, I must capture the child's attention.

Brain function researchers have applied various definitions to what *attention* is. Princeton University scientists Timothy J. Buschman and Sabine Kastner describe *attention* as "thoughts, emotions or motivations, relevant to goals that will get preferential processing through the brain... and without attention, cognitive functions are quite impaired."

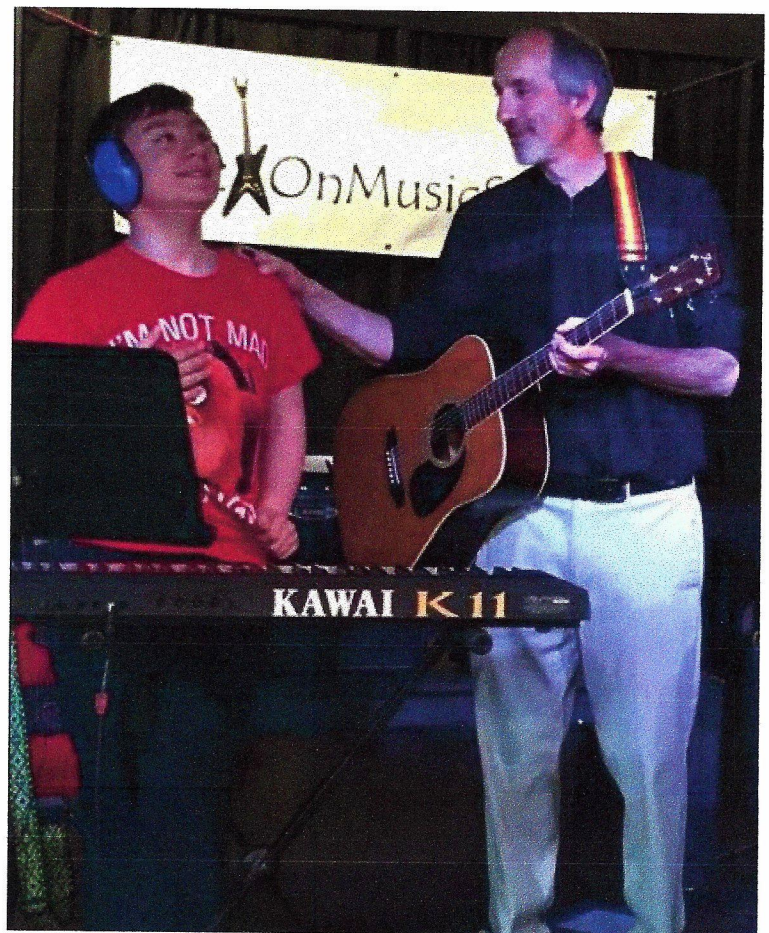
Difficulties in sensory processing are often visibly evident for many on the autism spectrum. Before I begin with a new student, I ask myself what will motivate him/her to focus, process, and react—essential elements to making music. First, I always make it fun, and then I apply the Five Factor Approach.

The Five Factors

- Environment
- Familiarity
- Accessibility
- Rewarding
- Fast

Environment

Creating a comfortable, happy space is essential. The location should be familiar and free from outside stimuli. The environment also includes our attitudes. It should be one that is light-hearted and non-threatening. At our place, we don't worry about mistakes.



That only creates a palpable air of stress. My goal is for the child to feel the joy and fun that music brings.

Familiarity

A familiar topic or song has already been subject to brain processing. Prior to lessons, I try to learn what interests or music the student has or enjoys. Unfortu-

nately, much of modern pop music has themes that are inappropriate, or their compositions inapplicable for the child's skill level. So I have created songs to which I can import lyrics to match his/her interests. This may be a song about a child's family member, pet, favorite holiday, the weather, a TV show, or a movie character. The student can even help me add lyrics that describe what he/she loves about the song subject. Now the song is all his/her own, which results in easier and more enthusiastic memory recall.

Accessibility

The music selection must be physically and mentally accessible. To gain attention, the child should recognize that the activity is in reach of his/her capabilities. Therefore, my beginner songs are based on repeating patterns and easy instrument movements. Song lyrics should not be overly wordy or require a wide vocal range. "Whoa-Whoas" and "La-Las" are easier to process than trying to connect long sentence structures to melody and rhythm. Measured breaks are helpful. They provide cues for the child to process and respond. I also allow the student to experiment with the sounds of the instrument or his/her voice.

Rewarding

Music releases positive energy. In many activities in the student's life, he/she is "boxed in" to regulating responses to fit the social norms. Contrarily, a music activity may involve singing, screaming, banging on drums, or playing instrument notes as fast as he/she can. Other songs may be silly, subscribing to the child's sense of humor.

Participating in music activities can provide an uninhibited release. The child may not initially realize the benefits of music and how to contribute, so it's my job to try and instill this. For some, a motivational treat or activity is helpful to get started or to complete the task. For others, a smiley face sticker might just do the trick.

Fast

Though the long-term goal is to maintain attention and build skills, my experience has found that lively, short musical motions are best to *gain attention*. I have witnessed a link between speedy, peppy music and attention. We live in an environment of fast information. For many, a slower rhythm opens the

door to other stimuli, and you lose the attention of many children. As I play a pattern faster and faster, the energy builds, and the child redirects toward the music.

Fast also means the length of the song or musical pattern. The exercise should be formed in a way for the child to easily anticipate the beginning and end of the song. Normally, I count to four before we begin to play our instrument. If I can get the student to count and start the song, even better!

Putting It All Together

Let's link these ideas together in a song I call "Spaghetti." (I recommend playing this one before dinner.) The tune has a familiar theme and is musically accessible, fast, and fun. It can be adapted for many instruments, though below, it is applied for piano.

Put out two fingers on one hand to make "rabbit ears." Play this hitting two notes at a time. Play the piano along with Bom Boms and Bum Bums as shown below. After the musical expression, call out your favorite food. For something a little more challenging, use only Italian foods.



Bom Bom Bum Bum Bom "SPAGHETTI"

Bom Bom Bum Bum Bom "PIZZA"

Bom Bom Bum Bum Bom "MACARONI & CHEESE," etc....

(Beat Count)

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4

****Note,** Bom Boms or Bum Bums do not have to be sung. It is a verbal expression of how the music sounds. The root chord is A-minor, so you can use an "A" note on the bass. You can also jam on your drum or instrument in place of calling out.

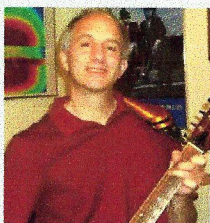
Ample research supports how music links the differing processing compartments of the brain. Children on the spectrum may not have the natural capacity

to open these brain connections. If you can motivate them and *gain their attention* to the music, you can open these links between sensory processing and controlled response. Once this process begins, you can then use the characteristics of song and music to *maintain attention* for longer periods.

Look for *Using Music to Maintain Attention* in an upcoming publication and Rock On!

Reference:

Timothy J. Buschman, Sabine Kastner. From *Behavior to Neural Dynamics: An Integrated Theory of Attention*. Neuron, 2015; 88 (1): 127
DOI: 10.1016/j.neuron.2015.09.017



David Meyers is a music specialist who has written over 100 songs designed specifically for music learning. His unique brand of teaching includes Dave's Ten Terrific Tunes—songs that often can be played in the first class. David currently provides music lessons for children and young adults of special needs in Westchester and Putnam Counties in New York. David is a member of the Children's Music Network and has performed at their national convention. You can hear his music and see videos on his website.

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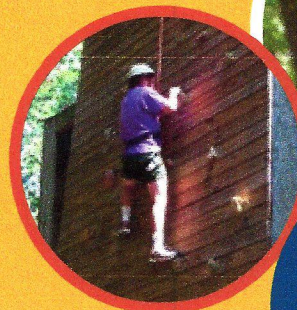
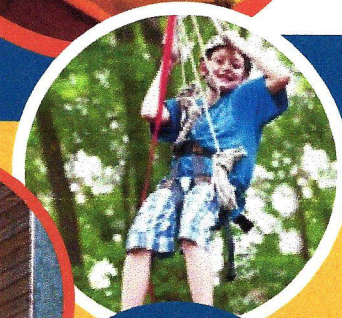
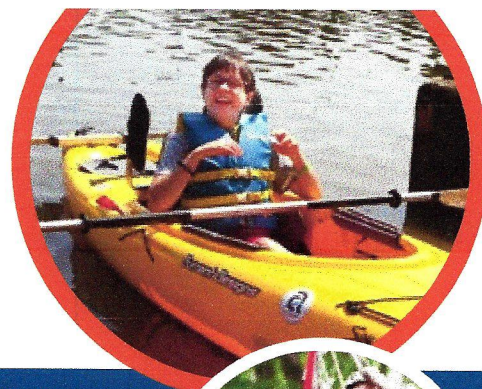


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