

SUTHERLAND HOUSE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S  
SERVICES

# Musical Interaction

An overview of the approach at Sutherland House School

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## **What is Musical Interaction?**

Musical Interaction is an interactive approach primarily for developing social and communication skills. It was developed at Sutherland House School in Nottingham, where it has been used with pupils aged 3-19 who are on the autism spectrum. It is used alongside other interactive approaches such as Intensive Interaction. It involves using songs, games and musical 'conversations' to engage pupils in social interaction.

Musical Interaction was pioneered in the early 1980s by Isabel Jones, who worked closely with the school staff. Since then, these and subsequent staff have continued to use and develop the approach, working with several different music specialists at the school. The music specialists at Sutherland House are musicians who have skills in accompaniment and improvisation. They are able to use live instrumental music and song to support interaction between an adult and pupil.

There are two adults (music specialist and key worker) with one pupil in each session.

Musical Interaction facilitates an interactive process between the musician, the key worker and the pupil. The pupil is encouraged to take the lead, whilst the key worker's role is to promote engagement and to extend interaction with the pupil. The music specialist's role is to facilitate the interaction between key worker and pupil. It complements other work done at Sutherland House School in terms of the emphasis the school places, with all of its pupils, on promoting emotional well being, interaction and communication. As an approach, it is distinct from music therapy although there are certain similarities.

Musical Interaction is timetabled within the school day, alongside other curriculum based teaching sessions. It is an integral part of our school's provision, of planning and reporting systems and of internal training for staff. Not all pupils are able to have musical interaction sessions every term, so within school there are regular prioritisation reviews.

## **How has Musical Interaction developed?**

In the 1980s, behavioural approaches were the main method of teaching at many special schools, including Sutherland House School. Behavioural approaches are interventions which are designed to change an individual's behaviour. They are characterised by being structured and task based, with an emphasis on rewarding favourable behaviour. These methods continue to have some use within school, and are often effective for teaching specific skills, vocabulary, facts and for

managing certain aspects of children's behaviour. However, to promote a flexible understanding of social communication, interactive child-centred approaches, like Musical Interaction, are more effective. Since the 1980s, interactive approaches are far more widely used and recommended within many educational and therapeutic settings. They take place alongside traditional structured teaching as well as other therapies.

Staff found that the naturally engaging qualities of music help motivate pupils to develop their communication skills in meaningful and playful contexts. By blending interactive principles with music in this way, Musical Interaction became established as a valuable part of the provision at Sutherland House School. At present three music specialists provide 34 sessions a week across the school.

### **What are the general aims?**

- To enjoy an experience of shared play and fun,
- To engage pupils in joint activities with a familiar adult, as a basis for developing social relationships,
- To promote the development of communication skills, such as eye contact, turn taking, imitation and initiating interaction, at a level appropriate to the individual's need, across the age range,
- To enable pupils to express their emotions and personality through musical play,
- To promote self-awareness, choice making, self-esteem and emotional well being.

### **What is the rationale behind Musical Interaction?**

Musical Interaction as an approach is supported by a body of research into early child development (see Christie and Wimpory 1986, and Christie et al 1992). This suggests that children on the autism spectrum have significant difficulty in accessing and learning social interaction from early stages in their development. They therefore miss out, to varying degrees, on the vital social and communication skills which ordinarily developing babies learn in their first few months of life. These skills include:

- Making sense of facial expressions, gestures and vocal sounds which adults use,
- Using pre-verbal conversational skills such as shared attention, use of eye contact, imitation, anticipation and turn taking which provide the framework for later social communication,

- Social timing – i.e. ‘reading’ the pauses in conversation to recognise when to take a turn, or when to initiate interaction. These are key skills to developing conversation and social ‘flow’,
- Experiencing social interaction as sufficiently meaningful and motivating to build towards rewarding and reciprocal relationships,
- An awareness of themselves, of the choices they want to make and the ability to communicate their views.

Typically developing babies learn these skills through playing with their parents and carers in everyday situations. Parents become naturally attuned to their own baby’s moods and preferences, responding intuitively to facial expressions, movements, sounds and routines. They also tend to build up short repetitive games (such as peek-a-boo, tickling, swinging up and down, chasing) based on what the baby has previously enjoyed. A parent’s ability to read body language and respond sensitively to their baby’s movements, sounds and moods is sometimes referred to as being able to ‘tune in’. This is one of the key skills used within Musical Interaction.

Musical Interaction helps a child on the autism spectrum to build some of the skills in the bullet points above by being encouraged to engage in natural ways of playing with an adult who is ‘tuning in’ to them. Supported by the musical accompaniment, the adult may respond to a child’s spontaneous movements and sounds by imitating, extending and exaggerating them as well as offering other games and songs to add to their repertoire. Using the natural model of ordinary child development, children and young people on the autism spectrum can work towards reaching their communicative potential. At Sutherland House School we do not view this approach as only appropriate for our younger pupils, but see it as one of several interactive approaches which can extend into adulthood.

### **Why music?**

Many children and young people on the autism spectrum respond positively to using music to support their communication skills. Offering opportunities to learn about interaction using music can be a positive experience for a number of reasons:

- Most pupils are captivated by music, and are therefore motivated to engage in shared play. Responding to music also comes naturally to many adults, which helps the flow of a two-way interaction.
- Music can be a means of communication which does not rely on speech. It can make skills such as turn taking, eye contact and imitation easier and

more meaningful for some children and young people who may get confused by spoken language.

- Singing a few phrases repeatedly can clarify and emphasise speech sounds, as well as offer opportunities to practise and understand the same key words. For both child/young person and adult, it can also feel more natural to repeat only a few words if they are within a song rather than ordinary spoken conversation.
- Simple repetitive songs and musical games can help people at early stages of communication to understand and learn new vocabulary, especially if they are supplemented by actions or props.
- Melody and rhythm can aid memory recall which can help when learning new information, new routines or new vocabulary.
- In musical activities, it is appropriate for two people to vocalise, sing or play simultaneously, so that even a person who finds social timing difficult can take part in successful interaction.
- The regular rhythm of music provides opportunities and cues to help highlight where the 'gaps' are in order to promote turn taking within communication.
- The structure of familiar songs and play routines can create a degree of security and predictability, which can help to reduce any anxieties on the part of the child or young person.
- Live music augments and highlights the mood of a moment by helping to build anticipation in a game, by exaggerating a theme, or by encouraging a calmer environment.
- Music provides a safe and acceptable mode for expressing a range of emotions. For example, a pupil who is feeling angry or agitated may be helped by playing drums loudly or by jumping or stamping within a structured situation.
- Live music can provide a changeable atmosphere which enhances the quality of interaction and engagement.

### **How does Musical Interaction happen within the school setting?**

Each pupil who has Musical Interaction comes to their session with a familiar adult. This is usually a member of staff from their class or tutor group. The continuity of this person is key to supporting the meaningful interactive relationship between the two. Ideally this key person works with the same pupil for a number of months, often a school year. Sometimes parents also join the session either to observe or to take the place of the individual worker.

The session happens in a designated music room with a music specialist. It is not essential that this room is elaborate or custom designed, though it can help

people on the autism spectrum if this room is consistent from one session to another. A room used for Musical Interaction should be furnished simply with a couple of chairs and floor cushions. As it is used for a number of pupils with a range of needs it is recommended that it is not a busy environment and that individualised resources can be brought out or put away according to pupils' needs. There is a digital piano in the corner of the room which gives the music specialist a clear view of what is happening. The music specialist is based behind the keyboard but may also join activities using smaller portable instruments.

Each music room has a range of percussion instruments, which can be made available as needed. There is also a range of props (sheets of fabric, bubbles etc) and some basic 'dressing up' materials (hats, sunglasses, saris etc). Communication systems should be available according to individual need such as symbols or pictures, which can clarify structure and facilitate making choices. Pupils will come to sessions with the personalised communication aids they use in their everyday life.

Musical Interaction sessions typically last for 30 - 60 minutes. The length of a session will be decided according to need, resources, concentration span and priority. Pupils having sessions will be prioritised by consultation with classroom staff, senior managers, parents and music specialists.

### **How are the sessions structured?**

In order to give a broad framework to the sessions, there are clear start and finish points. These are typically marked by a particular song or activity which is consistent for individuals. The balance between structure and flow within the session varies widely according to the personality, need and emotional responses of the pupil.

For example, a particular pupil might request a string of familiar songs each week, maybe even in the same order. The adults might try to negotiate for more variety within the songs, by varying the pace or props used, or by altering the order. They may also try to look for opportunities to make use of the space between two songs or activities into which they can add more flexibility or improvised interaction.

Other pupils may be more comfortable with a much looser structure, involving lots of spontaneous sounds and movements. The adults will be very responsive to these, using them as cues to build up short joint play routines and simple non-verbal 'conversations'. Adults do this by imitating, repeating and commenting on what they are doing. Adults may keep repeating some of the games or sounds that the pupil enjoyed, working towards the pupil initiating the next step. In less structured sessions like this, the adult tries to create a balance between tuning into

the flow of the pupil and offering opportunities for interactive turn taking or building play routines.

Each pupil follows their own path in Musical Interaction, and the adults try to guide them towards more balanced interaction where they can share a role in initiating and responding to each other.

Whatever the tone and style during the session, it is helpful to include a clear start and a preparation for the end, leading to a clear finish. This is most easily achieved by using the same start and finish songs or activities.

### **What do we actually do?**

Throughout all the activities, a common and vital strategy is 'tuning in' to each pupil in several ways. Tuning in means concentrating and responding to an awareness of a pupil's:

- level of communication skills
- mood and tolerance on this occasion
- personality, interests and preferences
- processing time and focus
- sensory needs or sensitivities
- behaviour

Staff draw on their knowledge of each pupil, their understanding of the autism spectrum and their experience of a range of interactive techniques. They combine these with intuitive responses throughout the session. We aim to 'meet pupils where they are' in terms of what makes sense to them and what they can tolerate in a given session. However, it is also important to stretch and extend them.

Some useful techniques include the following:

#### *Following the pupil's lead*

Letting a pupil take the lead might involve their choosing or initiating favourite songs and games, but is also about the adult tuning in to any small gestures, activities or vocalisations that a child makes. This may mean exaggerating and extending their movements and sounds with musical accompaniment.

For some pupils who find interaction particularly difficult, copying them can provide the first steps in demonstrating a 'conversational exchange'. This strategy can then hopefully lead to increased eye contact and turn taking and later, an interest in imitating in return.

Children and young people who are still developing their communication skills may be communicating using their behaviour and their vocalisations, but may not be doing so intentionally. This is often called pre-intentional communication and is part of the ordinary pattern of learning. Babies shift their pre-intentional communication towards intentional communication by lots of playful repetition and, crucially, by learning from the responses of the adults around them. Naturally responsive parents treat the pre-intentional behaviours and vocalisations of their babies as though they were intentional. For example, when a baby makes a sound we may reply, 'Oh really? Yes, I know'. When they yawn and cry we may say 'I see, you're tired now.' This is attributing communicative intent and it is a vital part of teaching interactive communication. As children become more active, we do the same with their movements too. For example, when they jump spontaneously we may respond by joining in and saying, 'You're jumping! Let's jump together.'

Attributing communicative intent is one of the most important strategies that we use in Musical Interaction. It means that we respond as if a pupil has communicated with us on purpose, even if they have not. When a pupil makes a vocal sound, we copy, repeat and maybe exaggerate it. We comment on it by incorporating it into the song we may be singing and reflect it in the live music that is being played. By using this way of responding in Musical Interaction sessions we can help pupils to learn and enjoy the purpose of communicating and to gain confidence in actively participating. In a flexible action song or sung commentary, attributing communicative intent can help pupils to make choices, take turns and share control of the activity.

### *Singing*

We use several different types of songs within Musical Interaction, ranging from tightly structured traditional songs to those which are improvised in response to something that happens during the session. The following three side headings are different types of songs.

Set action songs such as Incy Wincy Spider, Row Row Your Boat, or Heads Shoulders Knees Toes etc. are especially popular with the younger children. The consistent words, tune and actions give a clear and predictable framework for communication. This enables some children to anticipate or join in words and actions, or to initiate some interaction. For older pupils set action songs may be adapted or re-written to be more age appropriate.

Flexible action songs are those which have a structure but which are open to adaptation such as, 'This is the way we shake our hands / stamp our feet / tap our knees'. They may have a clear verse structure but will allow for new words or actions to be added or changed. They are a good way to give pupils a means of participating in a structured activity as well as initiating ideas, and can be used across a wide age and ability range.

Spontaneous improvised songs may be about any topic of interest, or may take the form of a 'running commentary' about whatever the child or adult is doing. They are often based around familiar tunes with different words or can be made up totally during the session. As pupils become more creative and communicative, this is a style of song that they will be increasingly able to participate in.

Once any of the various styles of song becomes familiar, the timing may be adjusted to maximise the pupil's opportunities to anticipate, contribute and imitate. In particular, using dramatic or subtle pauses maybe just before key words, favourite actions or the start of a chorus, helps pupils to spot cues to initiate and participate, whatever their ability level.

It is worth noting that not everything in a session needs to be sung, and that along with some musical accompaniment, rhymes and rhythmic chants can also be effective. These can take the same forms as songs (set, flexible or improvised).

### *Play routines*

Play routines are short repetitive games, often with a build up of tension, a dramatic pause, then a 'resolution' which is linked to a particular key word or action. They may follow a traditional format such as 'Peek-a-boo' or may be made up (eg. here we go up, up, up....and down!). They often develop naturally within active play, or 'rough and tumble' between parents and children. Within a school setting, it is important to give due attention to issues around age appropriateness and touch. It is also important not to let these issues block whether adults interact and play with pupils, just modify how they do so. In addition, personal preferences and pupil sensitivities need to be taken into account.

In Musical Interaction sessions, play routines are often used in a similar way to songs, that is, adjusting the timing, and inserting pauses at key points to encourage pupils to take an active part. Although these games are not actually musical, the accompaniment can enhance the interactive quality by exaggerating and extending the tension or the resolution. This supports pupils to anticipate, to build up variation and to maintain their attention.

### *Using instruments and props*

A range of instruments, particularly percussion, are used in Musical Interaction sessions. Props such as scarves, ribbons, balloons, hats or dressing up clothes can also be useful. There is also a role for some new music technology which can be used creatively. Instruments and props can add variety, context, interest and additional 'depth' to a game or activity, and can be used in different ways across the age range.

It is important to keep in mind that the central purpose of the sessions is interaction. This means that when adults are using any additional instruments or props they need to act as bridges to the interaction, not as barriers. Sometimes a motivating item may start as a bridge, then later become a barrier, if for example the pupil gets overly rigid or isolated in how they use it. In this instance, adults will need to reassess its current merits, and decide whether to limit or modify its use for a time.

### **What are the roles of the two adults?**

Essentially, the two adults aim to work in partnership in order to meet the individual needs of the pupil. This partnership between the adults obviously takes time to develop, so that they can predict each other and work more instinctively together. It is important to invest some time in this working relationship e.g. short discussions following a session, to share any thoughts or concerns.

#### *The role of the music specialist*

Music specialists at Sutherland House are musicians who have skills in accompaniment and improvisation. They usually spend most of their time during sessions seated at the keyboard. There are a number of aspects to their role:

- to support – The music specialist supports the interaction between the pupil and the individual worker, using mainly keyboard and voice. The musical elements of rhythm, harmony, melody and dynamics are used to react to, to interpret and to emphasise communication in the interactive process. The music specialist observes closely to look out for any opportunity for interaction and for any subtle initiation on behalf of the pupil. This supportive role is as both accompanist and initiator, the balance depending on the changing needs of the adult and pupil.
- To facilitate – Occasionally, pupils choose to involve the music specialist directly in the session. However, the main aim is to facilitate the interactive relationship between the individual worker and the pupil. This may involve prompting with words, music or sometimes filling gaps to keep the interaction going. The music specialist will usually need to take on more of a 'coaching' role with less experienced staff, though this balance should alter over time. With more experienced staff, the music specialist is more likely to observe and predict how the adult may be trying to engage the pupil and to provide accompaniment or musical structure to facilitate this.
- To offer suggestions – aside from offering musical suggestions throughout the session itself, the music specialist will be able to draw upon their experience of having worked with a range of other adults and pupils to suggest various strategies or activities. They will have access to a variety of practical

resources and a bank of songs they have developed. During discussions after the sessions they will be able to offer ideas and comments which will guide the ongoing progress. At Sutherland House School there are no prescriptive teaching targets for Musical Interaction sessions. This is because the central ethos of the approach is to remain pupil-centred and fluid. However the adults maintain a sense of direction and build on strengths as the pupil develops. Discussing this development is an important part of the effectiveness of the approach.

- To record and report – The music specialist is responsible for keeping a record of each session. This is done in the form of written notes on the content of each session and how the pupil has responded. We sometimes also make video or audio recordings of sessions. Formal written reports about musical interaction are added to each pupil's annual review report. Music specialists meet half-termly with a member of senior staff to monitor and develop good practice. An ongoing log of sessions across the school is audited to make sure that our policy matches our practice.

#### *The role of the individual worker*

The individual worker is usually a member of classroom based staff who works regularly with the pupil. This means that the pupil and adult have a variety of opportunities to build their relationship, and that the adult has a working knowledge of the pupil's behaviour and interaction outside the music sessions. Sometimes the adult working with a pupil in the music room will be their parent. There are a number of aspects to their role within the Musical Interaction sessions:

- Relationship with the pupil – whether a parent or member of staff, the adult has an ongoing relationship with the pupil, based on frequent contact. This means that they will have (or will be building) a detailed knowledge of each pupil's personality, their preferences, their strengths and their priority areas for development. They share this information with the music specialist in order to enable working together. They build on the rapport they have with the pupil by being engaged, pupil-centred and playful during the sessions.
- Communicate and interact – the individual worker actively engages the pupil in play and interaction. They maintain a delicate balance between working within a pupil's comfort zone whilst offering them a safe way to extend their skills. The focus is to promote communication and interaction. This needs to be done in a way that is meaningful and motivating to each individual pupil. As well as concentrating closely on the pupil, the individual worker needs to keep communication open with the music specialist. Once the working relationship between the two adults has been established, this is often done non-verbally or through the activities themselves in order not to break the flow of the moment.

- Linking with school and home life – it is important to work with pupils in a holistic way and an individual worker should be able to bring together experiences and progress that affect a pupil during their time at school, outside the Musical Interaction sessions, supported by information from the pupil's family.
- Setting boundaries – The environment of the Musical Interaction session is contained and secure. Sometimes pupils will explore emotions and boundaries which they may not be able to express in other settings. Within a school setting, there is something different about these sessions from classroom 'teaching' because they are pupil-centred, their content is fluid and their focus is about interacting. The adults may respond in a slightly different way to what happens in the music room compared to the classroom. For example, this may be even at a simple level such as feeling jumping off chairs as part of a game is acceptable in the music room. There will be different considerations for each pupil.

### **Concluding comments**

This paper aims to give an outline of Musical Interaction as it is used at Sutherland House School. Whilst this is a specific and intense approach, it should not be seen in isolation from the rest of the work within the school. The individualised, interactive style described here is used in many other situations within school and links closely with other approaches such as Intensive Interaction.

Musical Interaction is a core feature of the provision at Sutherland House School and is a valued part of the school ethos. As a reflection of this, it is embedded in many systems within school such as sessions being monitored by senior staff, training opportunities for all staff, and development of good practice at regular meetings.

Musical Interaction complements the other carefully planned and structured teaching techniques used within the school, which help pupils on the autism spectrum to make sense of their environment and to learn.

Above all, these sessions can provide space and time for each pupil and their individual worker to explore and develop ways of communicating, expressing themselves and enjoying interaction together.

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