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Power of Music Therapy

I. Introduction

Music is a universal phenomenon. It plays a role within every culture, including the United States. Music has the ability to heal- that is why music therapy has become a growing practice in America. Music therapy is a method of helping individuals through music-related interventions. The American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) describes music therapy as professionals working with clients “to address physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of individuals...[by] creating, singing, moving to, and/or listening to music” (“Definition” 2). This practice has been utilized on children mostly in hospitals, schools, and mental health centers. Exploring children’s health- along with concerns and benefits of music therapy- will help determine: Should America see greater value in music therapy for children?

II. Children’s Health in the U.S. (Issues)

Developmental and psychological disorders are prevalent among humanity; it is important to understand how often these health issues affect children. Through the examination of a survey, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that “1 in 6 U.S. children aged 2–8 years (17.4%) had a diagnosed mental, behavioral, or developmental disorder” (“Data” 7). Disorders impact the way people learn, act, and feel.

Adolescents may attain developmental disorders early or late into their childhood, but it is beneficial to recognize signs of their disorder as early as possible. CDC claims that “15%,

of children aged 3 through 17 years [in the U.S.] have a one or more developmental disabilities” (“CDC’s” 1). Many children part of this wide age range have disorders that go unnoticed. Paying attention to patterns in a child’s behavior may help identify a disability. The Child Neurology Foundation informs that children with development disorders typically struggle with communicating, completing everyday tasks, and responding appropriately in different settings (Karnebeek 13). It can be difficult to interpret whether a child does or does not have developmental challenges, since delayed children are sometimes considered late bloomers. CDC believes that identifying potential signs of developmental disabilities will help strengthen “prevention programs and policy development” (“CDC’s” 4). Bringing power to various organizations will bring power to children in need. Developmental disorders are not the only health obstacles children face, though.

Mental challenges are also ubiquitous among children in the United States. According to CDC, “ADHD, behavior problems, anxiety, and depression are the most commonly diagnosed mental disorders in children” (“Data” 3). Pressures from school, society, and personal circumstances may result in children developing these psychological issues. This is difficult for children to cope with, especially if they are battling multiple mental disorders at once. Through examination of the 2016 National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH), Dr. Reem M. Ghandour et al. find “that nearly 3 in 4 children with depression had concurrent anxiety, whereas 1 in 3 children with anxiety had concurrent depression” (265). While depression and anxiety affect many children, behavioral issues are still more prevalent. It is concluded that roughly 4.5 million U.S. children had a behavioral disorder in 2016- while 1.9 million had depression, and 4.4 million had an anxiety-related issue (Ghandour et al. 258). Regardless of what disorder a child exhibits, seeking therapy is essential in improving their

quality of life. Music therapy is a method that goes above simply discussing feelings; it is an interactive practice that has proven to help children.

III. Concerns and Alternatives (Concessions)

The few concerns surrounding music therapy are avoidable. Professional researchers Margaret Alic and Cait Caffrey highlight the potential, negative effects of music in their encyclopedia entry. They recognize that “Continued exposure to noise about 85 decibels (dB) will over time cause hearing loss” (1,836). Potential eardrum damage is acknowledged since children typically enjoy listening to music at a higher volume. This danger is completely avoidable if guardians and therapists help children control their volume level. Alic and Caffrey also mention parental concerns regarding children’s exposure to particular music: Lyrics discussing topics including drug abuse, sex, and violence may distort a child’s perception of reality. Listening to songs with negative messages may result in irregular behaviors and unhealthy addictions, thus leading to developmental and mental impairments (Alic and Caffrey 1,837). This damage would defeat the purpose of music therapy, but there are countless music options that adults can help children choose from; songs containing bad messages only make up a small portion of the choices available. If adults are providing the adequate supervision over children, there should not be any issues rooting from an adolescent’s exposure to music therapy.

Alternative treatment methods do not surpass the efficiency of music therapy, but instead may be more helpful to specific children. The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) explains different types of psychotherapy, including Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and Interpersonal Therapy (IPT). CBT helps children “identify harmful thought patterns,” DBT assists children in taking

ownership of their problems and utilizing conflict resolution, while IPT instructs children to “focus on how interpersonal events affect an individual’s emotional state” (“Psychotherapy” 2,6). Though these treatment methods are proven to be effective, they are all discussion-based. Most children prefer engaging in an exciting activity, instead of solely engaging in conversation. Play therapy actually exists, and is described by AACAP as “the use of toys, blocks, dolls, puppets, drawings, and games to help the child recognize, identify, and verbalize feelings...Through a combination of talk and play” (“Psychotherapy” 7). This form of psychotherapy appears to suit children more appropriately, since it does not revolve entirely around discussion. None of these psychotherapy methods are proven to be more or less successful than music therapy- but therapists will often not recommend the use of only one therapy form for children. AACAP assures that “a combination of different psychotherapy approaches may be helpful” (“Psychotherapy” 1). Even if more treatment may be necessary, music therapy can serve a significant, vital contribution to the recovery of a child. Though music-based intervention may not be for every child, its proven effectiveness is worth experiencing.

IV. Benefits (Support)

Music therapy helps children physically and developmentally in various settings and manners. Jenna Mendelson et al., who are affiliated with Duke University, study different time periods of children’s exposure to the music-based program, Voices Together- in a classroom setting. After investigating two groups- both consisting of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or other intellectual disabilities, the most significant increase of verbal responsiveness is seen within the group who experienced music therapy longer. These investigation results demonstrate how efficient music therapy is in improving verbal skills among autistic and other intellectually-

impaired children. Music therapy is also prevalent in multiple hospitals; Professionals at Monroe Carell Jr. Children's Hospital at Vanderbilt use music therapy to help children with pain management. A music therapist at the hospital "strums her guitar to the rhythm of [a four-year-old boy's] breathing... [and] helps him visualize what his abdominal pain might look like to help him imagine the pain getting smaller. [Then] The strum of the guitar slows the rhythm of his breath until he is able to relax enough to fall asleep" ("Benefits" 2). This young patient is able to reduce his physical pain by focusing on an instrument. Similar to how rhythm assists this child, other components of music can contribute to a youth's developmental skills. Board-certified music therapists Lauren E. Beer and Jacqueline C. Birnbaum's book *Using Music in Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy* explains how "Learning new words to a song, waiting to play or sing until the music requires it, and deciding how much volume or intensity to put into the music are comparable to developing cognitive skills of memory, sequencing, and decision making" (21). Dynamics, lyrics, and timing are components that children can focus on during music therapy in order to enhance everyday skills. Places that utilize music therapy illustrate how the practice can improve a child's physical and developmental being.

The psychological and emotional state of children has demonstrated exceptional improvement, following exposure to music-based programs. At Vanderbilt Children's Hospital, a 17-year-old girl transforms her favorite Bible passages into her own song, "Keeps Me Going." She was encouraged by her music therapist to create the song, in order to hold onto faith "through a difficult diagnosis" ("Benefits" 3). Music therapy provides this patient more strength during devastating circumstances. Children are also capable of reflecting their thoughts and feelings through music. Beer and Birnbaum discuss how a melody provides nonverbal children a way to express themselves (12). This is significant, because unbottling

emotions is crucial to good health. Multiple melodies are even capable of altering a child's mental stability. According to Beer and Birnbaum, "Consonant harmonies instill peaceful, relaxing feelings...[and can] transform the mood of a child who may be upset or agitated" (12). Simply listening to music may allow for negative feelings to diminish. A practice like music therapy allows for children to defeat mental challenges in a more engaging, comfortable manner.

V. Conclusion

Through research and observation, professionals have proved the success of music therapy. Though various benefits of music therapy exist and there are not negative factors heavily associated with it, there is no evidence of it being the most efficient form of therapy. Ultimately, the most successful type of therapy differs for each child. Regardless of which therapy practice works best among children, all educational facilities, health centers, and other institutions in America should have greater value in music therapy- by making it available to the youth. Incorporating versatile treatment methods ensures that each child is getting help in the manner that suits them most. Professionals should conduct future studies to compare how children react to different types of therapy. The results can help conclude which therapy practices generally work best among different age groups of children in the United States. Music therapy is one method with multiple, proven powers- the greatest power being that it is capable of changing a child's life.

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