

NEWS

Cognition and behavior: Music is promising autism therapy

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Best medicine: Music may be one way to reach out to children with autism who struggle with language and social interactions.

Integrating music into interventions **helps children who have autism with their social skills**, language and behavior. But methods should be standardized and tested for effectiveness at home, according to a meta-analysis published in January in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

Music offers one avenue for **communicating with children who have autism**. These children

often have delays in language and, in some cases, are musically gifted. The analysis considered 128 articles about music interventions, of which 20 met the strict inclusion criteria, to identify the most successful features of music therapy.

The studies are all published in peer-reviewed journals, include children with autism and controls younger than 18 and exclude participants with special musical talent.

One study embedded a song into a PowerPoint presentation to teach children the names of certain images. Another, focusing on social interaction, found that children with autism are more likely to interact with their peers when singing songs together. They also respond better to stories designed to help them address 'problem behaviors' when they are sung rather than spoken.

Incorporating music into behavioral therapy generally helps improve communication and social interaction and encourages specific behaviors in children with autism, the study found.

The study was not able to hone in on common features of successful music interventions, however. Improvised and composed music both appear to be effective. The studies also include a mix of professionally trained music therapists, family members and peers.

Overall, music therapy would be most effective at home, suggesting that the interventions should include family members and composed songs, which would be easier for people not trained in music, the researchers suggest.