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Music Therapy & Learning Disabilities Fact Sheet

Definition: Learning disabilities (LD) are neurologically-based processing problems that can interfere with learning basic skills such as reading, writing, or math. They can also interfere with higher level skills such as organization, time planning, and abstract reasoning. The types of LD are identified by the specific processing problem. “Learning Disabilities” is an “umbrella” term describing a number of other, more specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia and dysgraphia. A common characteristic among people with learning disabilities is uneven areas of ability, “a weakness within a sea of strengths.” In general, people with learning disabilities are of average or above average intelligence. There often appears to be a gap between the individual’s potential and actual achievement. This is why learning disabilities are referred to as “hidden disabilities:” the person looks perfectly “normal” and seems to be a very bright and intelligent person, yet may be unable to demonstrate the skill level expected from someone of a similar age. A learning disability cannot be cured or fixed; however, with proper support and intervention, people with learning disabilities can achieve success in school, at work, in relationships, and in the community. In federal law, under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the term is “specific learning disability.”

Incidence: Nearly 4 million school-age children have learning disabilities and they occur in approximately 1 in 59 or 1.69% or 4.6 million people in USA.

Characteristics and Need Areas:

- **COGNITIVE/ACADEMIC:** average or above average intelligence, difficulty listening and remembering, telling time, right from left, short attention span (distractible, restless and impulsive), difficulty with change and sequencing, poor memory, reverses letters, and frequently places letters in incorrect sequence
- **SPEECH/COMMUNICATION:** diminished receptive language, difficulty sounding out words, difficulty understanding words or concepts, delayed speech, difficulty discriminating between sounds
- **MOTOR SKILLS:** poor hand-eye (visual motor), gross and fine motor development and coordination
- **SOCIAL:** difficulty with discipline and following directions, wide spectrum of behaviors from withdrawn to hyperactive, and inappropriate responses to social situations, and low self-esteem and confidence

How can music therapy address the need areas for an individual with learning disabilities?

SPEECH/COMMUNICATION: Music can be used to practice and discriminate between sounds, aid in the development of receptive and expressive speech and language skills, improve choice making, communicate information/knowledge and develop an understanding of patterns of language. Co-treatment with speech therapists also enhances the effectiveness and rate of progress for children. This helps to facilitate the generalization of skills from the music therapy session to other settings.

COGNITIVE/ACADEMIC: Music can be used as mnemonic device to teach specific academic information such as a phone number, address, and other factual information. Customized consultation music therapy kits for a specific skill (e.g. learning the letters of the alphabet) can be created for family and therapists with included visuals, song lyrics, and a CD with a motivating, fun musical song to rehearse and check for understanding of the skill. In addition, the inherent structure of music provides predictability, is motivating and captivating, which often results in increased compliance and on-task behavior.

GOAL EXAMPLE for ACADEMIC

By (date), given melodic cueing and picture cards, Amanda will demonstrate the ability to sequence three steps of a story (first, second, and third) by manipulation of three picture cards and retell in her own words for 75% of opportunities with minimal prompting.

Baseline: Amanda is unable to tell the steps of a story. Due to her increased motivation and attention when music is present, music provides an enhanced way for Amanda to learn this task.

MOTOR SKILLS: Music therapy is effective in improving hand-eye coordination and gross and fine motor skills through instrument playing. Specific instruments can be selected to address the difficulties of an individual. For example, if a child has difficulty tracking and catching a ball, a drum (held by the therapist) and a mallet (held by the child) can be moved to different locations around the child and the child has to track and strike the drum as it moves. Music therapy can also address problems with coordination by providing a steady pulse with which to synchronize movements. Music and movement activities may include following simple directions in song (clap hands, stomp feet). Co-treatment with an occupational or physical therapist also may enhance the effectiveness of music therapy strategies.

SOCIAL: Music therapy is a motivating setting in which a child's social skills can be enhanced. The child can practice following directions, role-playing appropriate responses to social situations and participate in a group experience with peers. Social song stories can be created specifically for the child to address areas of need. These social song stories are used in many ways and can be role-played and generalized outside of the music therapy session. Another technique that may be used is songwriting, which can encourage creativity and emotional expression. Each group member may contribute an idea or word to a song the group is writing. In this way, music can be used to create a successful experience where the child can enhance his or her self-esteem with other peers.

RELATED RESEARCH:

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