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The Impact of Music on Individuals with Autism

In today’s society, music is everywhere. It is played in the store while mothers and children are shopping for groceries. It is played during the halftime of NBA games. It is played in the background of that sad ASPCA commercial. All these examples use music to make people in society feel a certain way; it is used to keep one excited for the basketball game or make one stop what he or she is doing to donate money to save animals in need. No matter where music is played, it is played with a purpose. Everyone uses music as a way to express him or herself, or just for pure enjoyment. But most people do not think of music being their only source of communication, and the only way they can express themselves. This is true for some individuals with autism. They rely on music as a way to connect their own unique world and the world around them. Different types of music will affect individuals with autism in different ways. The simplicity of classical music helps individuals with autism improve their speech by using the music to broaden their communication with others.

Autism is one of five subsets that fall under the Autism Spectrum Disorder. Autism is defined as a “neurological disorder that impacts brain function and behavior”(Ron Fang 14). In today’s society, Autism affects every one in 91 people (Ron Fang 13). Some characteristics are developmental delays, absence or impairments of speech and language, poor social skills, oversensitivity, resistance to change, lack of direct eye contact, odd or unusual repetitive play and self-stimulation (Ron Fang 11). Autism is never the same in two different individuals. That is why it is called a spectrum disorder and not just a disorder. A spectrum disorder means that there is a large variety of how individuals are affected and impacted by autism. The intellectual level, development of communicative speech, and the severity of autistic symptoms will be unique and different for each individual (Benaron 30). There is no set and stone example of what autism looks like. It will be different and unique for everyone.

Autism also causes severe impairments in communication and social interaction. It “affects the communicative areas of speech, language and socially acquired non-verbal codes such as body language eye contact and touch” (Ron Fang 15). This above statement explains how autism affects an individual’s speech and language specifically, and also how it affects individuals socially. People with autism, their speech can range form no speech at all, to a delay in development, to being fluent with inflexible speech (Yapko 87). The wide range of speech disorders or differences is connected to how unique and individualistic autism is. A common speech disorder found is Echolalia, which is a repetition of phrases or words (Ron Fang 15). For example, if a child with autism was playing with a toy trunk that he really liked and he is not extremely verbal, he may only say one or two utterances at a time. But this child really enjoys his truck so he may continue to say the phrase “me like toy truck”. This child will repeat this one phrase because it is something he can say and something he feels comfortable saying.

Along with having affects on specific components of speech, autism also affects the social side of communication. People with autism have difficulty understanding metaphors, idioms or irony (Ron Fang 16). They think that language is direct and straight to the point. They don’t get when people are joking or exaggerating something. Some people will not understand phrases such as “I’m so hungry I could eat a horse” or “ I feel like I haven’t eaten in years”. An autistic individual will think the speaker is being serious. Autism also impacts how social an individual is. One person may be happy being by him or herself, while another person may love social interaction and talking to everyone (Ron Fang 16). Autistic individuals also have a hard time making friends. They do not understand social norms, and how people go about making new friends. But whenever an autistic individual interacts with someone else, he or she will have a hard time interpreting non-verbal cues (Ron Fang 16). For example, the one person may be looking away, and acting like they want to leave the conversation. The autistic individual will not pick up on these cues. He or she will continue to talk to the other person until they physically say they have to leave and can no longer talk. Autism affects many aspects of communication, both the social aspect and the speech aspect.

Many researches have found a connection between music and individuals with autism. Some people even suggest that musical ability is a fundamental component of autism (Ron Fang 27). Whether or not it is a fundamental component of autism, it is shown in many different instances how autistic individual have attentiveness to music. Music is structured and consistent. This is appealing to autistic individuals. They respond better to music, and show a greater interest in music than any other school subject (Ron Fang 13). One reason why music is so appealing is because it allows individuals with autism to express themselves (Ron Fang 26). If an individual is non-verbal, he or she can use music to explain his or her mood and what he or she is feeling. Music is an easy way for autistic individuals to communicate with others. They do not have the pressure of creating topics to discuss, or keep the conversation going. They can use one song or multiple songs to explain how they are feeling. Some researches say, “music is a bridge between two vastly different worlds”(Ron Fang 13). It gives an easy way for an individual with autism to express his or herself and respond to the world around them.

Since autistic individuals are so fond of music, they are more likely to par take in activities if music is involved (Ron Fang 27). No matter what the activity, whether it is doing math tables, playing a game or anything, they will be more attentive and interactive in the activity. This is helpful for speech pathologists. Not only does music give autistic people a sense of communication, but music will also help the patient be more attentive in the therapy sessions. A speech therapist can find a song that is calm and soothing that will calm his or her patient down, and allow the therapist to work with that individual. Music that has a steady beat and is consistent gives an autistic individual a sense of security (Ulbricht).

Researches have written, “classical music causes more comfort and relaxation” (Ulbricht). If an autistic individual goes to a speech pathologist, he or she is in a new and stressful situation. In this situation, classical music may be played in the room to help calm the individual down. Also, the tone of the music allows the patient to express his or herself. One composition that would help an autistic individual is a piece of work by Phillip Glass, called *Six Etudes for Piano - q = 96.*

Philip Glass is an American composer born in 1937. As a young boy, Glass was interested in playing the flute. His interest continued as he grew up and he eventually attended Julliard to continue his music career. After Glass had finished at Julliard, he then moved to Paris to continue learning more about music (“Philip Glass”). While Glass was in Paris, he began writing music in a new style. He didn’t focus as much on the intense and complex melody of a song. Instead, he focused on the repetition and monotonous style. His music was minimalistic and was played by small ensembles (“Philip Glass”).

Philip Glass’ piece, *Six Etudes for Piano – q =96*, is a piece of music that displays some of Glass’ new found interests. This piece is not overly complicated. There are a few instruments that are repeated throughout the piece. The tempo is slow; the rhythm is consistent and steady. This piece has structure to it. All these characteristics are appealing to an autistic individual. Autistic individuals enjoy structure and repetition in their life. This music would fit perfectly for their enjoyment. It would create a calm and peaceful environment. This piece does not have an immense amount of stimulation. It would create a safe atmosphere rather than an angry or intense environment.

Music plays a large and important roll in the lives of autistic individuals. It gives them a voice that is understood by everyone. Even if they do not feel like talking or communicating with others, they can use music to help them express themselves. Music is more than something enjoyable to listen too. Depending on the style, music can be used to calm someone down, or get them excited for an upcoming event. Most people do not realize the importance of music. Music is more than just listening to songs that one likes, it’s a way for people to communicate and show society his or her true self.

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