



Connecting Through Music:

A Guide for Parents, Teachers, and Therapists of Children Who Have Special Needs

Part 1: Why Music?

Why should you use music to connect with your child or student?

- **Music is motivating.** Music is FUN! It can be used as a *natural* reinforcer or simply as a means for leisure.
- **Music holds our attention for longer periods of time.** Music flows and changes in a variety of ways: lots of notes, it can get fast/slow, loud/soft. All of this variation keeps music interesting and helps us attend.
- **Music provides structure.** Though music keeps our attention with variation, it is also provides structure and repetition. Knowing what to expect and having multiple opportunities to hear the same melody or lyrics lets the child feel safe and begin to learn information.
- **Music is a universal language.** While we all have different tastes, music speaks to each of us. Regardless of ability. Regardless of age.
- **Music is processed in the whole brain.** Here is an example of a study that was done with children on the Autism spectrum. MRIs were taken with AND without musical intervention. Many more regions of the brain were activated when music as used. Music helps the brain to process information and fire more neurons. (There is a separate sheet with this information.)
- **Music is multi-sensory.** You are probably very aware that your children and students have sensory needs. Music is a multi-sensory approach. It integrates auditory, visual, tactile input.
- **Music may be the preferred input.** Many children that I have worked with over the years respond to music over other forms. They may prefer directions to be sung rather than spoken, musical toys over non-musical ones as a couple examples. Of course this may not be true for everyone – each child is an individual!
- **Music can create trust and rapport.** If you are a parent or provider, you probably already know and love a child or children who have special needs. Your desire is to help them and to first do that you need them to trust you. Music has a special way of creating this trust and friendship.

Part 2: How Can You Use Preferred Music?

What does it mean to connect? First let's define what connecting is NOT.

- Connecting is **not** letting the child go off by themselves with a musical toy or iPad or music player. We want to spend time together! Active participation on your part is required.
- Connecting is **not** “giving in” just to make the child happy. Sometimes music can be calming and by all means, please play preferred music if something upsetting has happened and music is known to help. We do want to be careful about following through with requests or tasks. Make sure the child completes your request and then offer music as a reward or connecting experience.

Connecting is....

- **Developing trust and rapport.** We want to have mutual confidence, respect, and acceptance for one another.
- **Setting limits and being consistent.** As a parent, teacher, or therapist you must set limits and be consistent in your use of music. This helps the child know what to expect.
- **Recognizing that interest in music is a skill!** We must recognize that a child's interest in music is a strength. He or she should be encouraged in musical play and praised!

Part 2 Continued: How Can You Use New Music?

Failproof Method for Engaging in Music:

Step 1: Use the child's preferred music! It sounds simple and it is! As someone who cares for and provides a service for a child with special needs, you know them well. In fact some songs may be coming to mind right now. GREAT! That leads us to...

Step 2: Complete the song preferences worksheet. This worksheet was designed to help you think of all (or at least quite a few) of the songs that the child likes. As you will see on the sheet, think about artists, albums, song titles, musical toys, YouTube videos, and TV or video game music as a few jumping off points.

Step 3: Make a playlist. You can do this in the way that works best for you. Maybe you use iTunes for all your music. Maybe it's easier for you to navigate YouTube or burn a CD. Bottom line: Gather the music together so it is easy to access.

Step 4: Schedule your music time. You want to be consistent when playing music with a child. Pick a time that works with your schedule. Maybe before bed? When you are in the car on the way to school? Or on the way home? After meals? If you are a teacher, maybe music is best used first thing in the morning or maybe for the first few minutes of your one on one time with the child? The point is - *What time works for you?*

Step 5: Play the music together. This is the final step and it is the most important. Go do it! You can. Take bold action and play music at home, at school, or in therapy sessions. Get started NOW.

Part 3: How Can You Use *New* Music?

Time & Repetition. I have found that with time and repetition new songs can become new favorite songs. You must be patient. If your child struggles with change in routine, then *expect* that he will resist the first time a new song is heard.

Then...Pair the Preferred Song with the New Song

Use the Music Sandwich. It might look something like this. First the child gets to pick a preferred song. Now it is your turn to share the new song. Whether you listen to a few seconds or the whole thing, just survive it. Then follow up with another known preferred song.

More Time & Repetition. If you try this once and never again, it won't work. I already mentioned time and repetition but it truly is important. Use the "music sandwich" over and over and over again and see what happens. Be consistent and don't give up!

A New Song for YOU: We'll Be Together

This song was written especially for you in the spirit of connecting with music. I encourage you to try it and let me know how it goes! Use the music sandwich. You'll find the downloadable .mp3 and lyrics/leadsheet right under video 3.

What's Next?

- Fill out the survey. Your feedback is valuable as we continue to create and provide more resources!
- Check out our store. It is filled with songs written especially for you to use with your child.