Understanding Music Therapy’s Value for Children with Cerebral Palsy

Cerebral Palsy is a difficult condition with a wide range of symptoms and hurdles related to everyday life. Creating opportunities for children with CP to connect in pleasant, enjoyable ways is an obvious goal for any parent, which is why music therapy is such an exciting and important topic. Music therapy can be extensive in its forms and opportunities for your child, depending of course on your child’s abilities and interests. Exploring this unique form of therapy and finding out how your child with Cerebral Palsy can benefit most is an ongoing journey we hope to help you start.

Cerebral Palsy affects children in a variety of different ways, with a range of symptoms and ability levels associated with the condition. Whether your child faces motor control challenges or lives with more significant symptoms, the important thing is they deserve the opportunity to engage and enjoy music.

However, the impact of music therapy isn’t always tangible or specific. While music therapy can open new doors relating to discovery or awareness, it can also help introduce concepts like rhythm, patterns, tone and more.

Our goal with this guide is to introduce to you a spectrum of topics and ideas related to music therapy that can help your child. Building music therapy into your child's IEP or care plan can help your child achieve goals and continue to grow in different, exciting ways. We hope that each section inspires and allows you and your family to do more than you thought possible, not only leading to achievements in milestones, but with tangible success for your child!

This document, however, is merely the ‘tip of the iceberg’ in regards to how MyChild can help your child. Our resources go well beyond simple overviews like this and include items available for children with Cerebral Palsy provided by national organizations, in areas like education, housing, transportation, therapy and more.

For more information on anything contained within this document, or for other resources that can significantly impact your ability to care for a child with Cerebral Palsy, please do not hesitate to call us at (800) 692-4453 or email us at our general information email address (contactus@mychildwithcp.com). Find out what our decades of experience, helping tens of thousands of families, can do for your family.

MyChild with Cerebral Palsy
CerebralPalsy.org
(800) 692-4453
ContactUs@MyChildWithCP.com
Getting Started

Every parent’s experience is different because every child is. There’s no way we would be able to start a course of recommendations for ‘all’ parents of children with Cerebral Palsy because every instance of CP is different. As we noted before, this is merely intended as a starting point for connecting parents with helpful resources and tips associated with therapy, care and more.

With that said, our first area is to ensure you are aware of our websites, social media accounts and blog! We discuss a wide variety of topics related to parenting a child with Cerebral Palsy and update it regularly around those areas we find interest parents the most. The same can be said for our Facebook, updated more than three times a day on topics ranging from research, inspiration, world news and more.

Our Facebook: CerebralPalsyOrg
Our Twitter: TheCPorg
Our Website: http://www.CerebralPalsy.org
Our Pinterest: CerebralPalsy.Org

With that out of the way, let’s get started in showcasing a number of great resources we have found to be helpful for parents just like you that are facing the challenges of doing their best for a child with Cerebral Palsy!

Music Therapy

Introduction

Early intervention represents a number of efforts made at an early age to make the greatest ultimate impact. When a child suffers a brain injury like Cerebral Palsy, functions are made more difficult because a connection cannot be made for the proper reflexes or actions. Early interventional therapy is valuable because it teaches the brain how to complete tasks ‘differently,’ much like physical therapy can involve for adults a retraining of how certain acts are completed.

Music – with all of its complex beauty – not only relaxes children, it also soothes them during times of stress. Many of us may think it’s simply the enjoyment of listening to music that relaxes us, but in actuality, there’s something physical that occurs. Music therapy has some unexpected and valuable benefits for individuals with cerebral palsy.

The concept of music therapy has been practiced for years but was reconceived into a formal intervention for individuals with a disability in the 1940s. Programs for music therapy may be difficult to find in some communities, and because of its
newness, it may not be covered with all insurances. But the medical profession, as a whole, has accepted the notion that music can be helpful.

It not only brings joy, it also creates an environment that allows young people to develop and focus on their overall well-being.

Music can be a huge part in everyone’s life and can even improve a person’s life. More and more people are looking into music therapy to help increase their quality of life. From speech to memory, music therapy can help. Music can touch the lives of children with Cerebral Palsy and with music therapy they can receive many benefits.

According to the American Music Therapy Association, “music therapy is the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship...” In addition, research indicates that those that participate in formal programs experience several benefits, including increased motivation, higher levels of relaxation, and improvement in movement, socialization and language skills. It is important to find a professional who has a degree in music therapy and who understands your child’s specific needs. Music therapy can strengthen or reinforce areas of speech, cognitive abilities, and motor coordination and range of motion.

One benefit children can get from music therapy is an improvement in speech or language. Singing along to songs creates a structure that can improve a child’s fluency or rate of speech. Also, music therapy can “remediate unusual loudness, breathing and pitch of the speaking voice”. You can even use sign language, PECS, or computer assisted technology along with the music to enhance that way of communicating. Music therapy can not only improve speech, but also boost a child’s confidence while trying to communicate.

Children with learning disabilities or mental impairments can use music therapy to help improve cognitive skills. For example, the ABC song or the Head and Shoulders song can help a child remember the alphabet or learn body parts. Music is being used as memory aids and learning aids that can enhance a child’s cognitive ability.

Another benefit from music therapy is an improvement of motor coordination and range of motion. Movement or exercises can be matched up with music to help decrease muscle resistance and to improve endurance. Stretches can also be paired up with music to relieve tight muscles. Music therapy can be a fun, easy way to get your child moving and to improve motor coordination and range of motion.

Music therapy uses specific strategies to improve a person’s life. Some of the benefits include speech, cognitive ability, and motor coordination and range of motion. It is important to find a professional who has a degree in music therapy that can work with your child and possibly other therapist (speech, occupational, etc.) to help improve your child’s quality of life. Not only is music therapy fun, but it can benefit children with Cerebral Palsy and is worth the try.
**Striking a chord**

Music also helps young people express their tastes, whether through listening activities, playing an instrument, singing along, or moving to music. In general, therapy is carried out by a credentialed psychologist and/or therapist. Music therapy has been implemented in treatment programs for people who have experienced strokes, heart disease, and other maladies. People with psychological disorders such as schizophrenia have been known to benefit from music therapy, as well.

In the 1980s, therapists began using music to help children with disabilities. In the context of treating young people, therapists will take into consideration a child’s overall health, emotional state, cognitive ability, and social functioning.

Music therapy’s rehabilitative qualities are flexible enough to be implemented in a way that will address a child’s needs. In other words, children that need to develop social skills can take part in group performances and activities, or a child that needs to learn language and communication skills can participate in song to learn the words in music. Children with mobility difficulties can participate in dance, or exercise. Non-verbal children identify with and release emotion through music.

**Playing the right notes**

When a parent and child resolve to begin a music therapy program, the intervention could take several forms. Music therapists have been known to implement a variety of activities to treat a child’s needs.

After a comprehensive assessment, a child’s program could include anything from playing an instrument, or writing a song, or singing in the moment. Lyric association activities also help children learn new words; if he or she is listening to a song about a sheep, and looking at a photo of a sheep, the association is made.

Sometimes, children listen to music, and then discuss what they heard and what they feel. Music therapy can take place in an individual or group setting; depending on whether a child needs interaction with other children to grow and thrive.

Treatment goals will be measured to make sure the goals set forth in the child’s initial assessment are met, or exceeded.

It is not the goal of therapy to develop musical talent or acumen. The goal of therapy is to use the music to develop other skills – those they can use in their everyday life. Those goals include creating an environment in which a child can relax and concentrate, socialize and initiate conversation with other children or adults, understand and control their emotions, advance their cognitive abilities and
increase their self-esteem. If the child emerges from the therapy without any particular talent for music, but the other goals are met, the therapy is considered a success.

Creating harmony

Although music therapy can be employed in part to address some physical challenges, music therapy is not an alternative to physical or occupational therapy but a complement.

Playing an instrument improves flexibility and dexterity, which in turn helps refine gross and fine motor skills. Dancing helps exercise muscles. The music also helps lower the heart rate. But the benefits don’t end there.

Research has shown that music therapy helps with alertness because the beat of the music helps a child build connections within the brain that help them concentrate and focus. This helps the child respond to external stimuli quickly and appropriately. It can also ease muscle tension which is something that can significantly benefit a young person who has cerebral palsy.

The rhythmic nature of music also helps children with cerebral palsy organize their gait – they can time their movements to the beat of the music. This, in turn, allows therapy to take place in a way that is fun for a child.

The same concept also rings true when a child is learning to speak. The child can speak, or sing, in tandem with the music, which helps them develop control of the vocal muscles that are so often a difficulty for children with cerebral palsy. Repetitive speech – the kind of speech that takes place in song or specialized exercise – can improve a child’s ability to participate in a conversation.

Because verbal difficulties tend to construct communication barriers that can erode a child’s self-esteem, any therapy that can help a child move past his or her vocal issues is likely to be welcomed by a parent.

Cognitively, music therapy can be used to help a child recall conversation just as he or she would remember song lyrics.

Psychologically, the upbeat music can create a sense of optimism which has both physical and emotional benefits. Music therapy may not play a crucial role in a child’s overall medical treatment plan, but it can make a difference in how a child perceives therapy – and how he or she perceives his or her situation.

A child with cerebral palsy typically faces many challenges; a significant amount of time is spent in therapy. It’s not often that a therapy can be a source of enjoyment in and of itself.
For more information on music as therapy

To find a therapist

Music therapy is carried out in a variety of settings. Children may receive therapy in a hospital, rehabilitation facility, clinic, day care centers, community centers or specialized centers.

To find a music therapist

American Music Therapy Association – Music Therapist Search
Certified Music Therapist Verification

Musical Options for Children with CP

Music can provide joy and energy in people’s life. Playing an instrument and creating music is something every child loves. For children with Cerebral Palsy, ordinary instruments might not be an option. Technology has come so far and there are devices that will make it easier to bring music into your child’s life. Skoog, Touchtone, and Soundbeam are just three musical options that could work for your child.

Skoog is a large white cube with colorful round buttons protruding from each side. From gently touching to actually shaking or tilting the Skoog any child can produce music. It can be used for children with a wide range of motor skills and the sensitivity levels can be adjusted through the software. Skoog can even be connected to GarageBand. The Skoog itself looks fun and can help any child with the exploration of creating music.

Similar to Skoog, Touchtone also works with pressure. It is rectangular with multiple buttons that a child can use their unaffected hand to press, and then a round nob that is controlled by their affected hand. It may hard at first to coordinate their two hands, but children will improve over time. To learn more about Touchtone and a study that was conducted with it, click here.

Soundbeam uses something other than touching to create music; it uses movement. This can be great to encourage children to use more movement in their arms. Soundbeam is described as “an award-winning ‘touch free’ device which uses sensor technology to translate body movement into music and sound”. Sensors are set up and children can move their arms to interfere with the sensors that in turn create different tones. Children will enjoy learning how different, specific movements can create certain tones. Soundbeam is used in many countries all over the world and might just work best for your child. To visit Soundbeams website, click here.
Overall, music is an important part of growing up and every child should have a chance to create their own music. Your child may face different challenges than other children do, but there are many musical options out there for your child to enjoy. Skoog, Touchtone, and Soundbeam could all be possible options for your child affected by Cerebral Palsy. Finding the perfect option and letting your child explore music is very rewarding.

**What is Early Intervention**

If you frequently read our blog, you may have seen us use the term ‘early intervention’ when discussing future success for children with Cerebral Palsy. Just as it sounds, early intervention is focused on making an impact on a child’s development to limit problems related to CP. This may seem to be an obvious goal for any child facing challenges, but very little awareness exists due to the complexity of Cerebral Palsy.

First, in what forms does early intervention usually appear? In short, early intervention is specifically aimed at addressing the symptoms or challenges your child is demonstrating or facing at this time. For babies or toddlers, this can involve specific therapies to help them reach developmental milestones that may have been already missed or are on the horizon. Whether through stretching exercises, exploring orthopedic options, testing to determine limits, etc., early intervention can be the first step toward planning for other therapies and future programs. However, music therapy can play a key role in enhancing your child’s mobility, ability to comprehend patterns and interact in public/social settings.

In total, early intervention is specifically aimed at core focuses involving your child’s ability to move, engage (interaction), understand or learn, handle scenarios on an emotional basis and to continue to thrive and develop. As such, therapy can come in a variety of forms. Ultimately, early intervention is aimed at identifying challenges and building exercises (mental and physical) that address these.

What can parents expect from early intervention programs? Unfortunately there is no sure-fire methodology or direction to point parents to for complete success. Instead, success should be based upon how much impact they have on the areas your child needs help in. Early intervention cannot guarantee a child with physical challenges can walk, but it may also be a groundbreaking factor in fostering success involving walking, with or without assistive devices. The core focus of early intervention is to minimize the challenges you see in your child in the years to come; at its core, these efforts look to retrain the brain and body to solve problems caused by the brain injury resulting in Cerebral Palsy.

How do you access early intervention programs? Beyond having an open dialogue with your child’s school on what options exist currently, you can also contact us!
Find out what programs may be available in your city, state, etc., while also finding out what you should expect from schools and other programs. Your child has the legal right to a quality education, whether through special education programs or through assistive technology. But they also should be enabled to find success physically, emotionally, socially and more.

IEPs (Individualized Education Program)

Musical therapy can be built into your child’s education in the form of an IEP. Knowing your child’s unique needs and ensuring their education incorporates those challenges is crucial for breaking down barriers. Whether it is daycare or middle school, education is a real thing that requires careful planning. This makes an IEP an important component of your child’s ongoing path to success.

Far too many parents are led to believe that simply because their child has special needs, accommodations can’t be made to foster a quality education. The truth is that your child, regardless of his or her Cerebral Palsy, is not only entitled to Special Education resources, but also schooling tied to every child’s unique needs. Ensuring your child receives this specific schooling, while also doing as much possible to foster a quality environment is undoubtedly a challenge. However, the important impact early intervention via education and therapy can have makes it invaluable for the intellectual development of any child with Cerebral Palsy. This is where an IEP comes into relevance for your child.

IEPs and Your Child

You may have heard of an “IEP”, but assumed it to be a complicated or difficult process. Instead, it may be the very thing your child needs to be a major success in school. An IEP is an Individualized Education Program and it can be incredibly impactful due to its composition. If your child qualifies for special education services due to their Cerebral Palsy, they qualify for an IEP – it’s that simple and should never be presented any differently.

What is an IEP?

An IEP is an agreed to ‘plan’ for your child’s educational success. Based upon the combined efforts of a team of individuals acquainted with your child’s needs, an IEP unites knowledge from various disciplines and find a quality solution to barriers based on your child’s special needs. The terms of an IEP are unique to your child and can vary from time for tests to emotional considerations, the learning environment and more. Through evaluations of your child, an IEP is built and regularly monitored by ‘the team’ to ensure your child is on a path to educational success.
Who Helps With an IEP?

Parents. Therapists. Teachers. School district representatives. Guidance counselor(s). Educational advocates. Tutors. Each of these individuals can play an important part to an IEP team, and there is room for even more if needed. The goal of the team is to bring knowledge from disciplines, as well as interactions of the child, to ensure all boxes are checked and that success can be found within the IEP.

How Do I Start With an IEP?

Speak to your child’s special education teacher, as well as any administrators involved with core curriculum, to find out how to start this process. You can also contact us at your convenience for resources dedicated to better fleshing out this somewhat difficult subject.

None of the items in this overview are intended as an indictment of teachers and the education they provide in the classroom. Instead, we hope that this serves as an appeal for families to stand up and pursue an IEP if their child needs it. Overall, educators and parents alike want to see students succeed and the core focus of an IEP is to achieve results.

Care Plans (Including Music)

A care plan is a road map that will improve a child’s physical, developmental and psychological development. The care plan’s scope involves the input of several professionals that work to assess a child’s abilities and limitations, and devise treatments and accommodations that help expand a child’s capabilities. Many individuals come to the aid of a family touched by cerebral palsy. Since every child’s condition and circumstances are unique, their needs will be, as well. The types of services a family can afford or need – and the level of support they receive – depends upon many factors.

Access to health care facilities, health insurance, adequate shelter, financial stability, government assistance, community support, effective education plans, and funding can be extremely beneficial. The care plan outlines various aspects a parent may want to explore while managing their child’s journey with cerebral palsy.

Goals will be set for the child through health care appointments, treatment sessions and education evaluations. Some are short-term, like a change in diet to address a weight concern, or rehabilitation after surgery. Other goals are long-term in nature, providing a strategy for optimizing self-care, independence, lifespan and quality of care. Every child’s circumstances are unique. Goals are not necessarily cookie-cutter, as in one plan fits all, but, generally speaking, some common wide-ranging goals do apply.
The child’s care team will provide parents with health care goals. Each provider may have certain goals that relate to their particular treatment objectives. Some may be short-term goals, while others are long-term. School administrators may concentrate on educational goals, while an orthopedic surgeon may be more interest in mobility goals. Home care providers may concentrate on skill sets required to obtain self-care, independence and quality of life. In general, the long-term goals for an individual with cerebral palsy include:

### Suggested Goals

- **Manage primary conditions**
- **Prevent and manage complications, associative conditions and co-mitigating factors**
- **Control pain**
- **Optimize mobility**
- **Maximize communication**
- **Maximize learning potential and special education opportunities**
- **Encourage social and peer interactions**
- **Foster self-care and promote life skills**
- **Maximize independence and Self-sufficiency**
- **Enhance quality of life and well-being**

Most children with cerebral palsy can live long, happy, quality-filled lives. Admittedly, their care may involve more visits to the doctor, require therapy or medications, and perhaps surgery. The severity level, extent and location of impairment, pain levels and ability to function all play a significant role in a person’s quality and sometimes, quantity of. In addition, managing cerebral palsy involves proper management of the child’s primary and associative conditions. Co-mitigating factors like choking as a result of oral motor dysfunction, weight loss as a result of improper nutrient levels, or complications from seizures are all co-mitigating factors that are emergent and require proper and timely management, or it may put the child at risk for diminished life span.

### Technology and Adaptive Equipment

Beyond the treatment options mentioned above, there are programs dedicated to helping provide children with special needs, including Cerebral Palsy, with effective technology able to help them succeed in the classroom within a multitude of topics, including music. This can vary, especially based upon the physical abilities of the child: where some organizations may offer speech reproduction technology, others may push for iPads or the like for children who can benefit from using a tablet for their schooling.
Similarly, newer adaptive equipment can be made available in a wide assortment of ways, including local and national efforts. What’s more, your needs can differ greatly; where some families may just need used equipment from another family whose child has special needs, others may need significant, specialized gear or a wheelchair that cannot be repurposed.

Because there’s a wide variety in the types of assistance that may benefit your child, we request that parents contact us directly at (800) 692-4453 contact us today to find out how we can help to connect your child in the best means we know possible!

**Extras: Help for Parents**

Parents of children with Cerebral Palsy and/or special needs face a host of challenges that lead to a wide variety of feelings. Be sure to check out the following for helpful tips/assistance relating to being a parent of a child with special needs:

- [Free eBook for Parents of Children with Cerebral Palsy](#)
- [Avoiding Feelings of Isolation as a Special Needs Parent](#)

**Letting Go of Stress**

We’ll avoid delving into certain approaches of maximizing a child’s pre-school potential through exercises or techniques and instead provide a top-level overview of different ideas and concepts related to removing stress as a special needs parent of a younger child:

- [The Need to Take Care of Yourself](#)
- [8 Ways to De-Stress Your Life](#)
- [5 Things Every Busy Mom Can Do Daily to De-Stress at Home](#)
- [10 Ways to Reduce Single-Parent Stress](#)
- [7 Tricks to Help Stressed Moms Chill Out](#)
- [Special Needs Parenting: 12 Tips for Managing Challenging Behavior](#)
- [5 Tips for Handling Stress When Raising Children With Special Needs](#)
- [Getting Help with Care for a Child with Special Needs](#)
- [Tips for Selecting a Daycare](#)

It’s important to note that our organization does not necessarily back or endorse any of the tips above; we provide all of the resources included in order to propose unique, diverse approaches to the special needs parent audience as unique and diverse as ours.
Support Groups

Sometimes the best source for ideas, treatments, medical recommendations and more, not only in regards to being a special needs parent, but also regarding improving your child’s lifelong experience in your area, is parents just like you that live where you do. The list of active support groups in states nationwide are unfortunately changing every month. For more information on support groups or other likeminded organizations that may be able to help, don’t hesitate to call us at (800) 692-4453 or fill out our contact form, located here.

Go Beyond Your Zipcode

As we noted before, this guide is aimed at helping children with a wide range of abilities. If your child is online and you’d like to help them find their voice, consider this your opportunity. Whether you do this for yourself to interact with other parents just like you or for your older child, isolation is an extremely real and far too common reality for special needs parents and children alike. We hope that using this guide as a way to connect is a great use of your time.

One of the best things about the Internet is its ability to connect people from the comfort of their living room or home office. We have several avenues for parents and advocates to connect online, including our Forum, Blog, Facebook and Twitter accounts. What’s more, there are a wide variety of benefits with finding your voice online. One parent of a child with CP has been able to create a blog surrounding her experiences while others help nurture communities that benefit us all.

Opening the Internet up to your child must require careful consideration and setting parameters to ensure safety and more. It can’t be understated, though, that parents should take advantage of creating their own space to share their own story. Doing so not only helps connect with people across the world facing similar challenges but also helps your family and friends stay abreast of your daily life, as well as that of your child(ren). WordPress is a fantastic site/platform for people looking to start a blog, either for staying in touch with family and friends or reaching out and amplify their own Cerebral Palsy voice. Need help doing so? Check out the following:

- WordPress step-by-step overview
- 15-step tutorial
- WordPress WikiHow
- Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners

Twitter is also a great area for finding likeminded people who have a passion for topics that interest you (including Cerebral Palsy, special needs, IEPs, education plans, parenting and more).
You may hear ‘social’ and immediately think of social media (that wasn't the case even five years ago for most!), but there’s opportunities to get social off-line as well. One of the fantastic resources we have to offer is connecting parents with support groups in their area, which includes all 50 states.

How We Can Help!

Beyond having resources that can help you with any of the categories described above, we also have information on assistance programs specifically relevant for the warmer weather. Call us at (800) 692-4453 or contact us online if you would like access to any of the following items:

- **General Cerebral Palsy Support**: we have a wealth of information aimed at helping any individual who has, lives with or is an advocate of an individual with CP. Contact us through our contact form or by calling (800) 692-4453 for more information.
- **Energy Assistance**: programs dedicated to helping families struggling financially to pay for energy bills. This program is relevant to keeping the heat on but also caters to those families who need to keep the air conditioning on due to their child’s health, or even for comfort. This applies to heat in the winter as well!
- **Adaptive Equipment**: sometimes the fact your child has outgrown his or her equipment only becomes obvious when they are moving around. Find out about unique parent-to-parent exchanges, as well as organizations in your area dedicated to getting families the items they need for a fun and happy this summer. Or winter!
- **Quality Reading**: Speaking of summer, have you checked out our blog? While we’ve packed this document full of ideas to inspire a fun year for your family, we also are writing constantly on topics that matter to you on our blog! The best part is it is great for reading year-round!
Contact Information

MyChild at CerebralPalsy.org
(800) 692-4453
ContactUs@MyChildWithCp.com
CerebralPalsy.org