

# STRAIGHT TALK *About* **Autism**



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## The Magic of Music

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and Geoffrey Barnes, Ph.D., MT-BC, LMHC**

### Part two of two parts

**Author's Note:** In Part one, Dr. Geoffrey Barnes and I discussed two ways in which music can be effective in the lives of people with ASD. The first was as a medium to enhance social communication, and the second was as a way to support emotional regulation by increasing predictability and familiarity. We continue our discussion of six additional ways in which music may play an important role in the lives of those with ASD.

### ***Music is a motivator for active engagement and participation.***

**Geoff:** In music therapy, there is a premium placed on building a role for active participation together. I see that as very consonant with the SCERTS approach.

**Barry:** Absolutely, and active participation also has a positive impact on a child's self-esteem. Too often, children are aware of their difficulties or frustrations in other activities, so being able to be active participants—and at times, leaders in music activities—helps to build a more positive sense of self and awareness of one's strengths.

**Geoff:** Could you speak a little bit more about music energizing and involving children, in addition to soothing or calming them at other times?

**Barry:** When familiar music is used, or played during or as part of an activity, it can serve as a motivator. Once the music starts, and especially if it is a familiar song with a strong rhythm or catchy melody, a child may wish for it to continue or to be played again. Music motivates participation; it motivates communication; and it creates a sense that *we're all doing this together*, fostering a sense of community and membership. We know that some children and [older] people with autism have

what is referred to as a low-arousal bias, meaning that they are more likely to be lethargic, or even “zoned out” at times, in contrast to being in high-energy states for much of the time. For many students who have a low-arousal bias, rhythmic music, along with movement such as marching or dancing, may play an important role in helping the students shift to a more alert, focused, and attentive state. In these circumstances, music may also help to shift the emotional tone in a positive direction, which also supports a more energized state.

### ***Music is one way to emphasize a person's strengths.***

**Geoff:** For many years, you have emphasized recognizing and supporting a person's strengths, interests, and motivations. How does music contribute to this process?

**Barry:** We are well aware that for some persons with ASD, musical interest and abilities is an area of strength; however, we must seize opportunities to support and build participation and potential talents. For example, I have observed children in educational environments take leadership roles in inclusive music classes due to their exceptional abilities and talents. During a recent school visit, an elementary school music teacher highlighted the special abilities of a few children with autism in his class by having one child sing solo in a chorus and another lead the class in reading music on a SMART board. In this way, we're “leveling the playing field” by showing off strengths, when too often, it is a child's challenges that are so apparent to other students. When children with autism have frequent, regular opportunities to show their interest and abilities in music, it helps typically developing peers see their talents and ability to participate.

And the sky's the limit! I have known the pianist Matt Savage and his family for many years. Matt's parents recognized his

musical abilities when he was very young, and nurtured them throughout his childhood. Matt, now in his early 20's, is a world-renowned jazz pianist and composer. He even teaches music to children with ASD.

### ***Music can support coordination and motor development.***

**Geoff:** Can you talk about how music plays a role in supporting children's motor development?

**Barry:** We know that singing, chanting, and rhythmic music may support movement and help develop children's motor coordination. For example, when learning a new dance step, we may chant in unison with our movement: "Right foot forward, left foot forward, right foot back, left foot back." Some children with autism have motor coordination and movement difficulties, presenting additional challenges. Music allows us to create activities, and model the use of speech, gestures, and even signs to organize motor movement in fun and playful activities.

### ***Music can provide a context for families to engage with their family member with ASD.***

**Geoff:** Can you discuss how music can help foster pleasurable, shared family interactions and develop capacities in expressing feelings and "giving back" to others?

**Barry:** If parents are told that the primary way they should help their child is through regimented, language-based teaching, some may begin to feel that some of the essential playfulness and pleasure of the parent-child relationship is missing. Learning new skills *and* building mutually enjoyable relationships are both crucial. Research in family-centered intervention has found that when learning can happen within regular family routines, not only does it help children make connections to the meaning of what they are learning, [it also] provides many practice opportunities and it is easier for parents to implement. In other words, if we really want to connect with parents and siblings to help them be fully invested in collaborative efforts to support a child, it is best done in routines within the life of the family, rather than during isolated times or teaching sessions. When we can support a family's efforts in helping their child learn in every day fun activities, we are also supporting parents in their parenting roles and siblings in their more typical roles, rather than as surrogate teachers which would add additional stress. Of course, some parents and siblings are comfortable in teaching roles as well, but that should not be the only option that is emphasized.

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Learning best happens when all partners are experiencing positive emotion, and with positive emotional memories of those activities, partners will likely want to create those opportunities again. In contrast, a "demand mode," characterized by excessive question-asking and directing, results in less reciprocity and fewer shared positive experiences. Unfortunately, demand mode may be a natural outcome of raising a child who has problems sharing attention and responding consistently to requests. In our experience, most children and [older] people with ASD do not respond well to demand mode, especially when they perceive that partners are being controlling. Activities involving music, by their very nature, create a positive emotional tone and shared joyful experiences.

### ***Music can provide opportunities to "step out" socially, perform, and "give back" to others.***

One of the great challenges faced by persons with ASD is feeling comfortable either in front of, or participating in large groups. Music can provide those opportunities to engage with larger groups, and in some cases, actually perform for others. A pioneering and innovative program, the award-winning Miracle Project (TMP), is one shining example as documented in the Emmy-award-winning film, "Autism: The Musical" ([www.themiracleproject.org](http://www.themiracleproject.org)). Founded and Directed by Elaine Hall, TMP brings together persons with ASD and typical mentors over a number of months in creating a performance of a play, often with music and lyrics written by the participants. Music, song, dance, and acting all come together, and individuals [who] too often [are] challenged by their inability to connect socially become part of a coordinated, joyful, and creative experience that is a source of pride and delight for family members and so many others.

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**Music can be the link to trigger positive emotional memories, and to help a child reflect on, and better understand feelings.**

Music may be connected to so many positive memories [that it] has the potential to bring a flood of positive feelings to us. Music may also induce states of sadness and melancholy, thus tapping into a range of emotional experiences. [Since] understanding and expressing emotions can be challenging for persons with ASD, activities involving music are a wonderful means to develop an increasing understanding of, and ability to express emotions both verbally and nonverbally.

**Geoff:** I'd like to conclude by having you share some essential pointers for parents, professionals, and students to get started. What advice would you give in using music with children and [older] people with autism?

1. You want to have fun! That's what music is all about, and music has the unique quality to foster shared positive emotional experiences. Shared positive emotion also supports a well-regulated emotional state as well as motivation to engage and remain engaged. With positive emotional memories, children will want to come back and participate in activities again.
2. Use structure and flexibility. Encourage exploration and play with a variety of instruments, but also present and demonstrate patterns to help children see the "rhyme and reason" for engaging in the activity. Remember, predictability is a motivator too. Regardless of the degree of structure, we always want to foster active engagement and reciprocity in any activity.
3. Create opportunities for movement, as we know that so many individuals on the spectrum do not do well by sitting passively.
4. Use music in creating rituals and routines for openings, transitions, and endings of activities.
5. Create opportunities to request actions or specific items (through speech or through non-speech means of communicating). For example, children can request particular instruments, actions, songs, and contrasts such as loud/soft, fast/slow, along with expressing a range of other preferences.
6. Be aware of sensory sensitivities. A child may be initially reticent or even fearful of musical activities due to the acoustic qualities of the instruments or the environment. Introduce materials and instruments that have other interesting sensory

properties, such as visual properties. Some instruments for children include lights that illuminate while playing, such as keys on a small piano.

7. Engage peers, classmates, and siblings in activities. Other children often have a unique ability to engage a child [or older] person with ASD in a way that [may] feel safer or more secure than when adults do so.
8. Approach the use of music with an open mind. Initially, an activity may appear chaotic, and the child's reaction may be unpredictable, but if we closely observe the child's response to what we are presenting, and if we provide choices, and create a positive emotional tone, we can then move into creating many opportunities for learning and engaging.

This discussion only scratches the surface of the potential and varied uses of music to enhance quality of life for persons with ASD. We encourage all readers to think creatively about how music may be used in the lives of their family members or students. – **Barry & Geoff** 

**BIO**

**Dr. Barry Prizant** has more than 40 years experience as a clinical scholar, researcher and international consultant to children and adults with ASD and their families. He is an Adjunct Professor, Brown University, and Director of Childhood Communication Services, a private practice. Barry is co-author of *The SCERTS Model: A comprehensive educational approach for children with ASD* (Prizant, Wetherby, Rubin, Laurent & Rydell, 2006) and the assessment instruments, CSBS, and CSBS-DP (Wetherby & Prizant, 1993, 2002). He has published more than 100 articles and chapters and has presented more than 700 seminars and keynote addresses in the US and internationally. Barry developed and co-facilitates an annual weekend retreat for parents of children with ASD, and is the recipient of the 2005 Princeton University-Eden Foundation Career Award for "improving the quality of life for individuals with autism." For further information, go to [www.barryprizant.com](http://www.barryprizant.com), or contact Barry at [Bprizant@gmail.com](mailto:Bprizant@gmail.com).

**Dr. Geoff Barnes** is a licensed mental health counselor and music therapist. In inclusion and self-contained classrooms, he has enhanced the communication, social interaction, and joint attention of children with autism and typically developing peers. At the Boston College Campus School, he works with students with multiple severe disabilities in seven K-12 classrooms. Dr. Barnes teaches graduate and undergraduate psychology, special education, and music therapy at Lesley University in Cambridge, MA, and Endicott College in Beverly, MA. His private practice provides services for children and adults with intellectual and other disabilities. For further information, contact [GeoffBarnes345@gmail.com](mailto:GeoffBarnes345@gmail.com).

