



Did You Know? Clinical Practice Trends in Music Therapy and ASD

Petra Kern, Ph.D., MT-BC, MTA, DMtG
Music Therapy Consulting
Santa Barbara, CA

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) currently affects 1 in 68 individuals in the USA. Each reader most likely does know someone with an ASD diagnosis. Does this also mean that music therapy practitioners have more individuals with ASD on their weekly caseload? What goal areas do music therapists target? With whom do music therapists collaborate? These and other questions were the focus of a national survey study conducted by Kern, Rivera, Chandler, and Humpal (2013). In this summary, readers will learn about the major outcomes.

Professional Practice

Compared to a decade ago, the caseload with an ASD diagnosis slightly increased for music therapists. Most music therapists provide services in public schools (K-12), family homes, private practice (though with decreasing tendency), or in community settings, which partially reflect the principles of practice guidelines for individuals with ASD. Clients with ASD seem to be shifting slowly to the 12-20 and older age range; however, music therapists also see more infants and young children compared to previous years – facts that possibly can be attributed to 1) the maturing of clients and 2) increased awareness of the impact of early childhood intervention for this population. Music therapists frequently collaborate and consult with parents/caregivers/family members, educators, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and others for treatment planning and implementation. The rates of collaboration and consultation seem to be higher than those across populations in previous years. Within school-based settings, music therapists primarily offer group activities, whereas in other work settings individual sessions are more common. Yet music therapy services are still delivered primarily in a segregated versus inclusive environment. Most music therapy sessions are 30 minutes in length and are typically provided once per week with an average of 1-3 year service duration. Music therapy services mainly are funded by private pay, IDEA/Special Education State/County Funding, and grants.

Note:

This summary is based on the following survey study: Kern, P., Rivera, N. R., Chandler, A., & Humpal, M. (2013). Music therapy services for individuals with autism spectrum disorder: A survey of clinical practices and training needs. *Journal of Music Therapy*, 50(4), 274-303.

Therapeutic Process

Music therapists demonstrate a strong assessment practice, which is in compliance with recommended practices for ASD. Yet, there is no known validated music therapy assessment tool specific to ASD. Therefore, music therapists apply mainly self-created assessment tools and music-therapy or work-space specific assessment tools, although several new and specific tools are emerging. The top three goal areas targeted are communication skills, social skills, and emotional skills (almost not addressed a decade ago). Music therapy clients typically achieve intervention goals within 4-6 months. According to research-based practice, most music therapists apply a behavioral approach to music therapy, which is also reflected in the structuring of sessions (i.e., moderately to highly structured). Fewer music therapists reported using Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy or Neurologic Music Therapy, while employing computer-based music activities is increasing. Music therapy techniques utilized to achieve therapeutic goals are mostly singing and vocalization, instrument play, movement and dance, and free and thematic improvisation.

Evidence-Based Practice

Participants applied many of the National Autism Center's eleven identified evidence-based practices. Most incorporated prompting, reinforcement, joint attention intervention, and picture schedules in their music therapy sessions. Music therapists implement all guiding principles of practices for ASD on a very high level, except for serving clients in natural and inclusive environments. More than half of the music therapists received training in some of the identified evidence-based practices, obtained mainly via education programs offered outside the field of music therapy. Music therapists indicated receiving training in the principles of practices in similar ways.

End Notes

The interest in clinical practice trends in music therapy and ASD is evident. In the Oxford University Press Publisher's Report to the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) this study was listed at the top of accessed full-text Journal of Music Therapy articles in the first half of 2014. The outcomes of this study also were very beneficial to the steering committee of AMTA's

Strategic Priority on Music Therapy and ASD for prioritizing outcomes, objectives, and tasks of the strategic plan. The Strategic Priority on Music Therapy and ASD now focuses its efforts on a) increasing awareness and recognition b) training and professional development and c) evidence-based practice and research. For immediate updates, please follow us on Twitter at #MTASD.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to thank Dr. Nicole Rivera, Alice Chandler, and Marcia Humpal for their collaboration in this national survey study.

About the Author

Petra Kern, Ph.D., MT-BC, MTA, DMtG, business owner of Music Therapy Consulting is online professor at the University of Louisville, editor-in-chief of *imagine* and serves on AMTA's Priority on ASD's Steering Committee. Her research and clinical focus is on young children with ASD, inclusion programming, and educator/parent coaching.

Contact: petrakern@musictherapy.biz

Study Background

- ☼ The purpose of this study was to evaluate the current status of music therapy practices for serving clients with ASD, the implementation of national ASD standards and guidelines, the awareness of recent developments, and training needs of music therapists.
- ☼ Participants were professional members of AMTA (N=328) working with individuals with ASD.
- ☼ The study design in use was a cross-sectional survey study.
- ☼ The 45-item online questionnaire was distributed through email and social media and accessed through SurveyMonkey®.
- ☼ Data were collected for a total of six weeks.
- ☼ Data from multiple-choice questions were converted into percentages. Narrative response were analyzed by completed an open coding procedure.
- ☼ Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous.