

## How music therapy can help with movement and communication

### Introduction

Molly is a student at Sunfield. She has been diagnosed with autism and has severe learning disabilities and complex needs. This case study follows her journey to improved communication, movement and creativity as a result of her music therapy sessions.

### Background

Molly joined at the age of 11, with learning disabilities and complex needs associated with autism, as well as left-sided weakness, poor hearing and vision difficulties. She found communication challenging, as she could not use language and struggled to interpret and understand others. As a result, she was unable to enjoy meaningful engagement with the world around her.

Like all students coming to Sunfield, Molly took part in a comprehensive three month assessment, led by the Psychology and Therapies Team. As part of the assessment, which identifies care, health, learning and therapy targets, it was agreed that music therapy would be of benefit to Molly, alongside her Speech and Language sessions.

### The Journey

Molly attended weekly sessions of child-led music therapy. These regular and consistent sessions enabled her to form a strong therapeutic relationship with her music therapist. Students with autism, like Molly, need the supportive structure of predictable, regular sessions, and often find similar comfort in the rhythm and form of the music.

Molly utilised a range of instruments, improvising and using them to play out her feelings. The rhythms allowed her to develop skills in memory and cognitive development. These rhythms and repetitions are also known to regulate sensation, which helps with sensory processing and movement. This was evident in Molly, who found that a regulating song rhythm helped her to walk more smoothly down stairs. She also displayed more movement in her usually weaker left side when playing instruments. Molly soon began to seek out and enjoy the music therapy sessions, and her abilities in this area exceeded those in many other areas of her development. During her sessions, Molly began to vocalise her feelings and emotions; taking an important step towards language development.

Techniques such as mirroring and matching while playing instruments provide another way for children with communication difficulties to experience an understanding of another person. Equally, music which requires listening, responding, timing, turn-taking and adjusting can encourage interaction without the need for language. Such activities often inspire, rather than command, vocalisation - as was the case with Molly. Making music is, in itself, deemed to be a creative activity - a skill expected to be deficient in autism, yet Molly showed clear evidence of enjoying the sessions and the rhythms. Relaxing music can also dissipate some of the anxiety associated with conditions such as autism, enabling children like Molly to better process learning and emotions.

### The Conclusion

As a result of her music therapy sessions, Molly now displays physical improvements to her movement, as well as an improvement in her understanding and her ability to build meaningful relationships. She is also better able to accept endings and change, and to focus her attention for longer periods.

Because music therapy is available on-site at Sunfield, Molly has been able to regularly access this service as part of her school week, with no disturbance to her routine. By working together, and drawing on the insights shared by the music therapist, the team around Molly have been able to make a genuine difference to her living and learning, through her music therapy sessions.