

# ASK THE EXPERTS

## Autism and Music – A Parent’s Guide to Involving Children in Music Education

By Christian Schenk



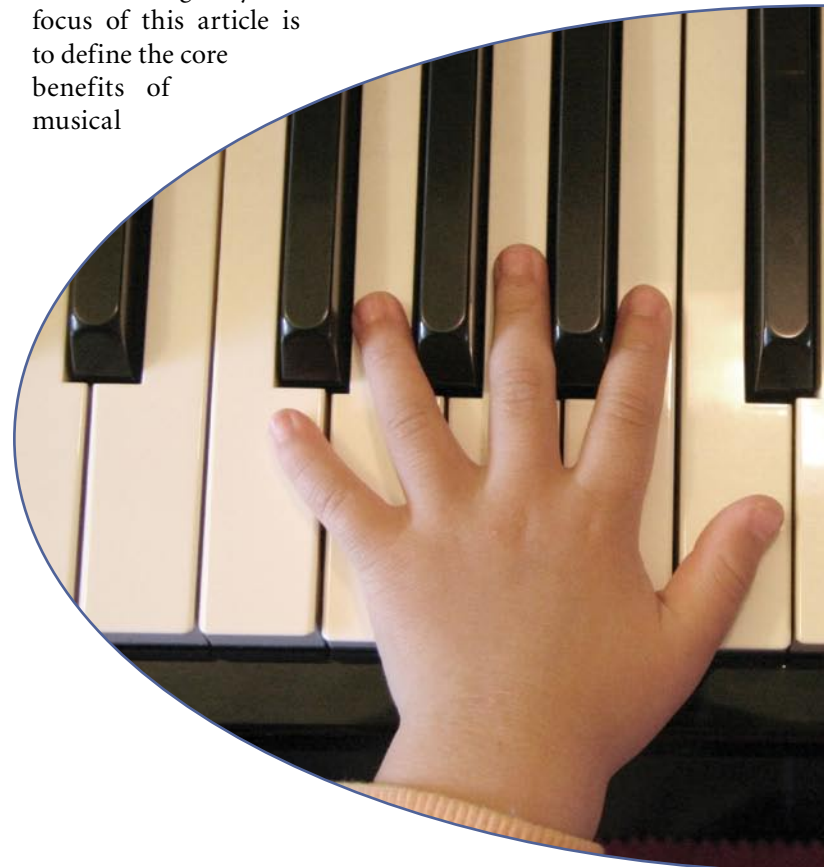
*My son Chase loves music and music therapy has helped him immensely. We’re thinking of trying some music lessons, and would appreciate some guidelines. Any advice?*

Music is a natural communication medium for many children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). For some, it’s the rhythmic beat or the sing-song phrasing that is appealing and exciting. For others, playing an instrument comes almost without effort. For most, however, music forms a bridge we can use to gain attention, learn or sharpen skills or improve the quality of life for these individuals.

I met Quinn Kopfman in February of 2004. I had just opened my first music studio in the first floor office of my home, and his father contacted me about giving Quinn piano lessons. Quinn is on the lower-functioning end of the autism spectrum. He has very little speech, almost no reading abilities and communicates with an assisted speech device. He had been involved with music therapy for several years. Quinn loved music and the therapy had helped him greatly during his school day. His father and I were skeptical about how Quinn would do with music lessons, as opposed to music therapy, but we decided to give it a try.

That was three years ago and Quinn is still a student of mine. Though we have had our ups and downs, he has succeeded in gaining the basic ability to perform simple songs on the piano, and has even performed in three recitals so far. Each week Quinn makes incremental improvements. Some of the gains he has made have generalized into his formal education program.

Many parents are familiar with Music Therapy, but fewer parents consider music *instruction* as an avenue to explore with a spectrum child, especially those more challenged by autism. The focus of this article is to define the core benefits of musical

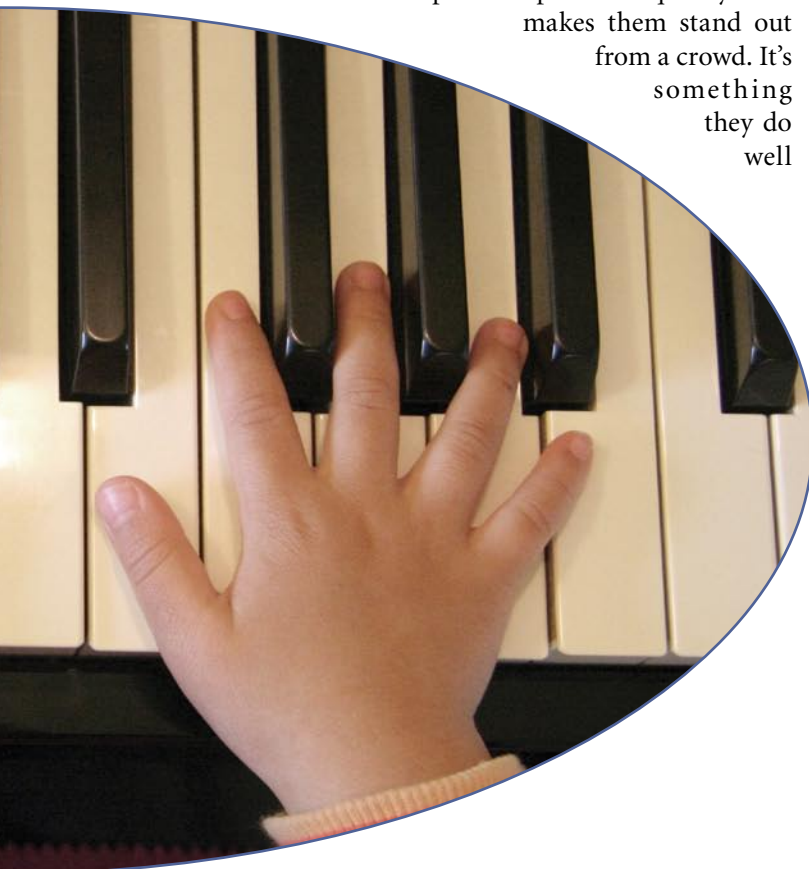


instruction, offer some guidelines for selecting or starting a program and working with instructors, and provide a brief overview of a few basic strategies for teaching these children.

## Core Benefits of Music Instruction

While the benefits of Music Therapy are widely studied and celebrated, the benefits of instruction are equally abundant. The main difference between Music Therapy and Music Education is the intended outcome. The goal of Music Therapy is primarily to improve a child's social-emotional well-being or to teach or enhance other skills using music as the medium of instruction. Music Education, on the other hand, is focused on developing skills necessary to competently perform and to enjoy the art of producing music.

The most obvious benefit of music instruction is acquiring a new skill that can be exhibited to others. For many of my students their musical talent is a positive personal quality that makes them stand out from a crowd. It's something they do well



amidst other more challenging areas of their lives. The boost in self-esteem and self-confidence is immeasurable and is often transferred to many other areas of the child's life.

Other benefits include improved communication, attention and motor skills, enhanced listening, patterning and sequencing abilities and better reading and tracking skills. Music can be intrinsically motivating to children with ASD so that skills develop without their being aware of it. Indeed, this growth is evident based on the feedback I hear from my students' parents.



## Guidelines for Selecting a Program and Instructor

For many parents, the first question is about private versus group instruction. While there are pros and cons to both approaches, most children with ASD seem to do better with private instruction since it offers the one-to-one attention they typically require. Private lessons also give them the opportunity to be the center of attention, and lessen the tension that often comes with learning and performing in front of others. On the other hand, group lessons are a great vehicle for social interaction and a shared common interest among students. However, they can easily feel like "therapy" to the child, removing some of the joy that is at the heart of music.

Aside from the question of private versus group instruction, parents should consider the qualities of an effective instructor. This is where it often gets tricky, because music instructors knowledgeable about ASD are scarce. In many communities parents can find a licensed Music Therapist who accepts private students or a Special Education teacher



who is also a private music teacher. These individuals will most likely have experience working with children with special needs and they are an ideal choice. However, even when such a person can't be found, all is not lost. Certain personal qualities can turn a typical private music teacher into one perfectly suited for an autism spectrum child.

Look for a private teacher who is very patient and willing to learn about your child's autism, his needs and his individual learning style. When I train instructors for my studio, the first thing I teach them is how to do basic discrete trial teaching. It is an effective teaching strategy with ASD students, and has become one of the foundations of my method. Once a teacher has learned DTT, we then get into the actual teaching techniques. If an instructor is not interested in learning about your child, how autism affects him and make accommodations to work within the child's learning style, keep looking. You haven't yet found a suitable candidate.

How about already established music programs in your community? How can you tell if the program is going to be effective with your child? Some of the same considerations apply. You'll need to find out about the program and meet the person who is running it and/or will be working with your child. Write down a list of questions that will help you ascertain how they will 'fit' your child. Then be sure to observe for yourself. Call ahead and schedule an interview, a trial lesson or a time to observe them in action. Also, ask for a list of references, and check a few out. You'll learn quite a bit that will help you make a decision.

## Working with the Instructor

Once you have selected an instructor and/or program, it's time to introduce your child to the new teacher. This can sometimes be a delicate venture, and every situation is different. Some children need to visit the studio a few times to get comfortable with the environment before the first "lesson" actually begins, while other

students are comfortable enough on the first visit to sit down and get started. Others will need their parents close by for a while to decrease their anxiety. This is OK at first, but parents should be faded out of the lesson as soon as possible. It's important to allow a true bond to grow between the student and teacher.

When a specialized program is not available in your community and you've opted to work with a willing, but autism-inexperienced teacher, parents can ease the transition for all involved by providing some autism training to the music teacher. Many inexperienced instructors may not understand the child's need to get comfortable with a new person and a new environment and that this often takes longer than with typical students. They may not appreciate the impact of sensory issues, nor the child's often rigid way of thinking.

In my studio, I have available for all my instructors (and parents) various journal articles and materials about ASD, other disabilities and effective teaching styles. Putting together an information packet for your child's teacher is never a bad thing, especially if he or she shows an interest in learning more. It is never too early to introduce them to autism!

## Some Basic Teaching Strategies

Teaching strategies for special learners are truly endless, but I have found that a few work well with many of my students. Parents



can introduce these strategies to less experienced music instructors so they have a place to start their teaching. It is also important to note that parents should be aware of the teaching style being used in the formal lessons so they can carry through the same style in the practice routine at home.

**Suzuki Style** - This model is a very common and successful technique for teaching very young children to play music. It can also be very effective with autism spectrum students who are strong auditory learners. In the beginning instruction is via hand-over-hand prompts to show the child where his or her hands need to be. This then shifts into a “you play it, he plays it” exchange. Start simple – with one or two notes at a time and progress from there. This style works very well with nonverbal students with strong memorization skills. But like all of the styles described here, it can be an effective part of any student’s learning program.

**Color-Coded Style** – This is a new style I have been actively developing for the past two years and hope to introduce in the near future as a lesson workbook for other teachers. The system appeals to visual learners and consists of uniquely colored strips applied to an instrument to teach children to discriminate the notes on that instrument. As

the student progresses the colored strips are removed one at a time and the notes are taught independently.

**Traditional** – It may come as a surprise, but sometimes the best method for teaching a child with ASD is the traditional “conservatory type” instructional style. Music practice is very much rote repetition, which appeals to the learning styles of many ASD students. Many of my students have done well with this method. We just get out the old method books and get cracking.

There are several ways to teach music to children who may not learn in traditional ways. Patience, creativity and teamwork are needed to forge a successful musical experience for children and adults with autism spectrum disorders. If your child or one with whom you work shows an interest in a musical instrument, or music in general, give it a try! The rewards they reap can go far beyond being able to play an instrument. Above all, have fun with it! 🎵

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