



Supporting Disabled Musicians in Music Activities

Youth Music Booster Training for City College Plymouth
10th March 2020



Participating in Music with disabled musicians requires specific skills and sensitivity from supporting staff. Support workers / Learning Support Assistants are crucial to the success of a music session. They can enhance the participants' experience and development.

Support workers may, however, often feel out of their own comfort zones, perhaps based on their past experiences of musical participation (e.g. a negative or humiliating experience at school). It is important, therefore that support workers are empowered within sessions to feel comfortable to participate in music making in their own right.

The expectation is that the support worker's focus should be on the people they are working with and not on themselves – in this context PMZ recognises that it can be a lot to ask that their own emotions and fears are left at the door. This may mean that it's necessary to point out the level of support and involvement that's required before, during and after sessions and that activities are planned carefully to support this. This means that everyone is clear about expectations for the group as a whole and working on a level playing field.

Suggestions for Positive Supporting participants in Participatory Music Sessions

- Bring a positive attitude to sessions to contribute to the feeling in the room – it's a shared experience (even if you are not feeling confident about your own ability in music making!) Nobody is judging you. Give-it-a-go!
- Join in where it feels appropriate to encourage your music student/s and maintain focus.
- Get to know your student/s in a different context through musical activity. This can often give you a unique and deeper insight into the person. It can be powerful and positive to communicate what you have noticed in sessions within your wider team / organisation as it may have an impact that is beyond the actual session (e.g. noticing an improvement in communication skills or physical movement).
- Be yourself and don't be afraid to enjoy yourself too.
- Explore music alongside the student/s in a way that allows them to take as much control for themselves as possible.
- If you're assigned as one:one support, work with your assigned student unless they are fully independent, in which case work with someone else in the session or remain engaged with the whole group (you are setting a positive example for participation).
- Be open in your expectations of the response you receive: Everyone is unique...enjoy the diversity.

- Note (written or memory!) any 'lightbulb' moments where your student has engaged, shown a change in behaviour, or you have seen a progression. Let the music leader / facilitator know – they can't spot everything and won't know the students in the way that you do. They can build this knowledge into their practice and planning.
- Give the music leader information about your student, for example what they enjoy and what motivates them.

Some other considerations...

- Think about where you physically place yourself when supporting wheelchair users, for example avoid being behind the chair or leaning on it (you may potentially invade their personal space). Place yourself face to face / side by side with the student as much at their level as possible.
- If the student is not initiating playing an instrument or is showing they are uncomfortable with the activity, don't force them to do so. Hand-over-hand is sometimes needed as a supportive measure for students with physical disabilities, but try to avoid this wherever possible by exploring options with your music leader to allow the student to do this for themselves. For example, explore how and where instruments and equipment is placed in reach and whether trays / mounts or stands might help make this more accessible. There may also be adapted instruments available or music technology to make 'traditional' musical equipment more accessible.

- Think about whether you are allowing enough time for the student to respond to an exercise (e.g. when turn-taking in a circle). A positive group dynamic and sensitive music leader will be patient, allowing space for genuine individual expression and handing over control to the participants
- Consider whether your own ideas of what 'sounds right' is appropriate in the context. Everyone needs space and time to explore and work things out without feeling that they are being criticised, particularly when working through new ideas and material. You may personally feel that the musical output is challenging or imperfect, but it is really important that you respect the music leader / group by remaining non-judgmental. It's easy to demoralise and discourage people from participating by making comments or using negative facial expressions.
- When it's sometimes necessary to talk about a student, think about whether this should be done when they are present (e.g. "She never likes doing that"). Making decisions for them (even if you're well-meaning) can be disempowering – empowerment is key to building a safe and creative environment.

If you need to share something with the music leader, perhaps find a quiet moment to do this.

- As support workers, you are most likely to be very aware that some people assume that non-verbal / post-verbal people can't understand what is going on around them. This is very often not the case. Offer choices wherever possible to empower people and respect the individual, using as many creative ways as possible to communicate with one another without words.
- Keep your service user safe, but allow them to take as much control as possible in sessions in order to push their own boundaries and try new things whilst being supported.

Reflection Questions for Support Workers / LSAs – these may be helpful in your evaluation of music activities and how they may impact on other learning opportunities:

- How did different people respond to the music activities (including colleagues, leaders, students)?
- Did anything surprise you?
- What worked?
- What did you struggle with?
- Did anything make you feel unconfident or embarrassed?
- Did you see any benefits from the group's participation in music?

