The Effect of Music Therapy on Joint Attention Skills in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

ABSTRACT The purpose of this study was to explore further whether children with Autism Spectrum Disorder displayed more joint attention behaviors—interacting and requesting joint attention—during music therapy, cooperative play, or independent play conditions. Joint attention is defined as the shifting of attention between an object or event and an individual. The effects of different types of music therapy interventions on these joint attention behaviors were also examined. Participants (n = 4) engaged in 3 session types: 1) cooperative music therapy, 2) cooperative play, and 3) independent play. Using a 15-second observe, 5-second record time sampling method, intervals were coded for the presence or absence of interacting and requesting behaviors. Data were graphed and a visual analysis of the data revealed that a higher percentage of interacting behaviors occurred during music conditions than both cooperative and independent play conditions across participants. Data for requesting behaviors was inconsistent across participants, and therefore the results were inconclusive. Graphic analysis of the effects of music therapy intervention types on joint attention behaviors revealed that when the participant and researcher played the same instrument more interactions occurred, whereas when the researcher and participant played different instruments more requesting behaviors occurred.

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Joint attention is often absent in children with autism spectrum disorders. Support exists for effectiveness of early interventions targeting joint attention behaviors (National Autism Center (NAC), 2009). Music therapy, defined as an emerging treatment for individuals with ASD (NAC, 2009) is one potential avenue for developing a structured intervention focused on improvements in joint attention behaviors (Kim, Wigram, & Gold, 2008). Using a multiple-baseline design across behaviors, this study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of music therapy interventions targeting the pivotal behavior. Music therapy interventions have been used with children diagnosed with autistic disorder for the past fifty years. The present study examines the effectiveness of music therapy intervention on development of joint attention behaviors in children diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder both within treatment and as reported by parents outside of treatment. Improvement in joint attention behaviors was noted in 70% of participants after only 8 individual music therapy sessions. Results indicated that the addition of music therapy intervention to a child’s treatment program can have positive