

Meeting Social and Emotional Needs of Special Learners Through Individualized Music Instruction
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Terms

Individualized Approach: The teacher designs instruction that meets the child where she or he is functioning in music development, social communication and regulation of behavior and emotions. The teacher offers support as needed in each area with a balance that allows for progress in increments – enough but not too much.

Social Communication: According to the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013)*, social communication is defined as communication for social purposes in a manner appropriate for the social situation, e.g., talking on the playground vs. talking in the classroom or during a piano lesson. It also includes using communication that fits the needs of the listener, e.g., talking differently to a child and to an adult. Social communication means following “rules” for talking with others, e.g., using verbal and non-verbal cues, being able to rephrase things to be understood, and taking turns in conversations. It also means begin able to understand things that may be ambiguous, e.g., humor, idioms, etc.

Regulation of Behavior and Emotions: Regulation of behavior and emotions means using self-control to modulate impulses, emotions, and behavior in a manner that is appropriate for the situation. For example, if a child is very angry, he or she can express and control the anger in a manner that is not destructive to self or others. If a child is experiencing joy, she or he can express her feelings in a way that is acceptable for the setting and situation.

Pervasiveness of Problem: Pervasiveness means how frequent and widespread is the condition. Where does the problem occur? Does it occur only at home, only at school, only during individual instruction, only in the presence of specific people, or only in a group? How frequently does the problem occur? Does it occur every day, once a week, once a month, etc.? Pervasiveness of a problem is important information and can give clues as to why the problem is occurring. In general, pervasiveness of a problem with social communication or regulation of behavior and emotions is a strong indicator of the severity of the difficulty.

Levels of Functioning for Special Learners Social Communication

Social Communication – Severe

Selected Indicators (In all settings):

- Extreme and/or frequent difficulty with eye gaze and joint attention
- Extreme and/or frequent lack of imitation of sounds or words
- Extreme and/or frequent use of echolalia
- Extreme and/or frequent lack of awareness of or interest in others
- Extreme and/or frequent absence of initiating meaningful interaction with others
- Extreme and/or frequent lack of response to social overtures from others

Social Communication – Moderate

Selected Indicators (In two or more settings):

- Consistent and/or occasional difficulty with eye gaze and joint attention
- Consistent and/or occasional difficulty using words for communication
- Consistent and/or occasional use of gestures and sounds to gain needs/wants instead of words
- Consistent and/or occasional lack of response to social overtures from others
- Consistent and/or occasional difficulty reading facial expressions and body language
- Consistent and/or occasional difficulty initiating social interaction

Social Communication - Mild

Selected Indicators (In one or more setting):

- Some and/or infrequent restricted and rigid communication
- Some and/or infrequent trouble with “give and take” conversations
- Some and/or infrequent limited spontaneous communication
- Some and/or infrequent difficulty with expression of feelings
- Some and/or infrequent difficulty reading facial expressions and body language
- Some and/or infrequent difficulty initiating social interaction

Levels of Functioning for Special Learners Regulation of Behavior and Emotions

Regulation of Behavior and Emotions – Severe

Selected Indicators (In all settings):

- Extreme and/or frequent rigidity with routines
- Extreme and/or frequent resistance to changes in routines
- Extreme and/or frequent unusual reactions to sensory input
- Extreme and/or frequent repetitive or stereotyped motions
- Extreme and/or frequent displays of distress, anger, anxiety
- Extreme and/or frequent attachment to objects

Regulation of Behavior and Emotions – Moderate

Selected Indicators (In two or more settings):

- Consistent and/or occasional difficulty with transitions between activities
- Consistent and/or occasional rigidity with routines
- Consistent and/or occasional repetitive or stereotyped motions
- Consistent and/or occasional sensory issues related to eating, clothing, sound
- Consistent and/or occasional attachment to objects
- Consistent and/or occasional difficulty expressing feelings and regulating behavior

Regulation of Behavior and Emotions – Mild

Selected Indicators (In one or more setting):

- Some and/or infrequent difficulty with transitions and changes in routines
- Some and/or infrequent sensory issues related to eating, clothing, sound
- Some and/or infrequent restricted interests and fixation on specific topics
- Some and/or infrequent rigidity in thinking
- Some and/or infrequent repetitive or stereotyped motions
- Some and/or infrequent difficulty expressing feelings and regulating behavior

**Suggestions for Music Teachers Using Individualized Instruction
Special Learner at the Same Level of Functioning in
Social Communication and Regulation of Behavior and Emotions**

Social Communication MILD & Regulation of Behavior and Emotions MILD

- Give some choices of songs, instruments, and music materials
- Allow student to have input in lesson agenda
- Use cognitive behavioral therapy techniques, e.g., behavior charts, practice charts, visual reminders, music journals
- Use improvisation interventions to encourage expression of emotions
- Structure music interventions to work on reading gestures and facial expressions
- Use opening and closing music routines and rituals

Social Communication MODERATE & Regulation of Behavior and Emotions MODERATE

- Incorporate imitation of sounds and movements into music interventions
- Focus on songs and materials that promote eye gaze and joint attention
- Use music interventions that provide prompts for verbal or nonverbal responses to questions
- Build tolerance for small changes in routines by preparing student for the changes
- Use opening and closing music routines and rituals

Social Communication SEVERE & Regulation of Behavior and Emotions SEVERE

- Provide hand-over-hand assistance as necessary and as tolerated by student
- Focus on eye gaze and joint attention
- Work on imitation of movement and sounds'
- Promote awareness of surroundings through starting and stopping with music
- Use opening and closing music routines and rituals

**Suggestions for Music Teachers Using Individualized Instruction
Special Learner at Mixed Level of Functioning in
Social Communication and Regulation of Behavior and Emotions**

Social Communication MILD & Regulation of Behavior and Emotions MODERATE

- Give students some limited choices of music and activities within lessons
- Make small gradual changes in order of songs, activities and music materials for the lesson
- Use the structure of music to regulate behavior
- Provide visual prompts
- Use music activities to work on eye gaze and joint attention
- Use opening and closing music routines and rituals

Social Communication MILD & Regulation of Behavior and Emotions SEVERE

- Provide visual prompts
- Use music and structure of the lesson to regulate anxiety and behavior
- Work on imitation
- Make small gradual changes in routine
- Work on increasing tolerance of sound input
- Use opening and closing music routines and rituals

Social Communication MODERATE & Regulation of Behavior and Emotions MILD

- Allow input into selection of materials and music
- Use music interventions that require verbal or nonverbal responses
- Focus on music and materials that promote eye gaze and joint attention
- Plan music interventions that teach reading facial expressions and body language
- Incorporate taking turns in conversations and music activities
- Use opening and closing music routines and rituals

Social Communication MODERATE & Regulation of Behavior and Emotions SEVERE

- Use hand-over-hand assistance to help students participate in music routines
- Use pointing and gesturing to promote eye gaze and joint attention
- Encourage imitation of sounds and movements
- Use songs that involve stopping and starting with the music
- Use opening and closing music routines and rituals

Social Communication SEVERE & Regulation of Behavior and Emotions MILD

- Focus on eye gaze and joint attention
- Use scaffolding of music interventions to help students build on goals already mastered
- Teach taking turns and sharing music materials
- Use music and songs to promote awareness of self and others
- Use opening and closing music routines and rituals

Social Communication SEVERE & Regulation of Behavior and Emotions MODERATE

- Use music interventions that incorporate imitation of actions, sounds, and word approximations
- Focus on eye gaze and joint attention
- Promote awareness of surroundings through starting and stopping with music
- Use music and simple songs that help students learn to tolerate a variety of sounds
- Use opening and closing music routines and rituals

Closing Suggestions

- Each special learner, just as with a typically developing child, is an individual and has a unique style of learning. “Breaking the code” for a student’s style of learning may be more difficult with children with special needs, but the instructor’s patience and observation skills with the student will usually pay off.
- Look for the small changes in the special learner. Sometimes there will be large gaps and growth patterns in one or more specific area (language, social/emotional development, cognitive development). This knowledge can be vital in assisting the child to progress in music. Use scaffolding to help the student move to the next level.
- Be aware of normal developmental changes in students and incorporate these into working with the child.
- Growth in music in the special learner can take hours, days, weeks, months, or years. Be prepared, however, to be surprised, because special learners sometimes make huge leaps from day to day.
- Collaborate with other teachers and professionals who work with children with special needs. You don’t have to have all the answers. Know your own strengths and limitations. Collaboration is often the key to tremendous growth for the teacher and the special learner.

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