

Learning to Play a Musical Instrument is for People with Autism too!



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AHA published this article recently in our newsletter, *On The Spectrum*. It is by our advisory board member Dr. Stephen Shore and titled, *Learning to Play a Musical Instrument is for People with Autism Too!* Dr. Shore is a professor in the Ammon School of Education at Adelphi University and also teaches any musical instrument locally in Nassau to students of any age. He can be contacted at: Tumbalaika@aol.com. Dr. Shore often speaks for AHA at our fall or spring conferences and this year will be presenting on Sunday, April 3, 2011 at Adelphi at **Issues in Independent Living for Adolescents and Adults on the Autism Spectrum**. For more information on the conference and on Asperger Syndrome and related conditions go to www.ahany.org Enjoy this article.

Learning to Play a Musical Instrument is for People with Autism too!

By Stephen Shore, Ed.D.

Preparation

“Can you help me draw a straight line down the middle of the page?” I ask my student upon our initial meeting.

Done!

“How about 3 more lines, going sideways?”

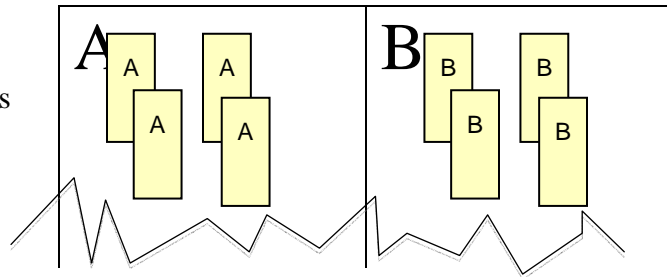
Done!

Soon we have 8 empty squares on what was a blank notebook-sized piece of paper.

“A!” responds my student when I ask for the first letter of the

A	B
C	D
E	F
G	Extra

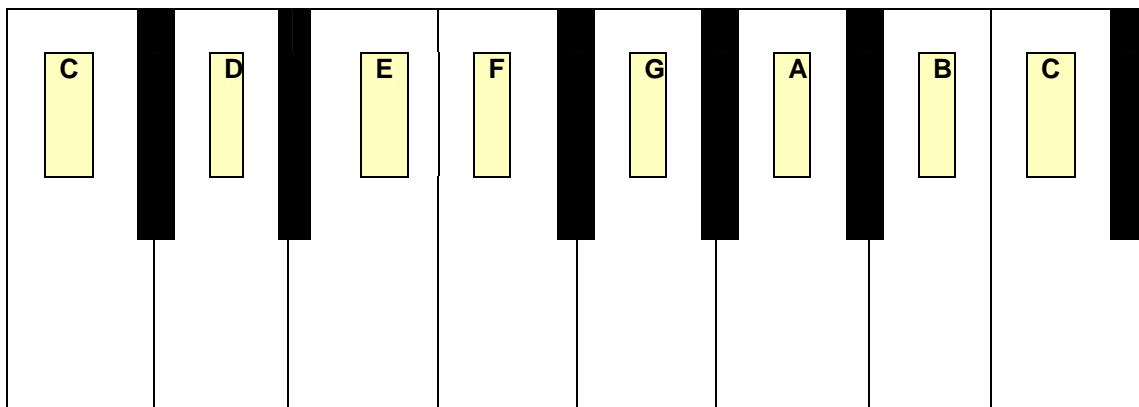
“Where do you think the ‘A’ goes?” The child responds – often by pointing – to the box with the corresponding letter on a previously prepared piece of notebook paper. Next thing we know, that paper is filled with letters.



After placing all the letters in their proper location on the sheet it is now time to explore the piano keyboard.

The Keyboard

“I wonder if you can guess what the 1st key on the piano is called?” Often the child responds by naming the letter “A,” which is correct for an 88-key piano. The note “C” starts off a 61 keyboard.



“Can you place an ‘A’ on that first key?” “What comes next?” Soon the entire keyboard is filled with little stickies[™] marking the notes. From here we explore the keyboard, make a musical staff and start reading music without my mentioning that is what we are doing.

Rationale

The goal is to teach the child on the autism spectrum how to play a musical instrument. I have found that children with autism tend to have very little patience for diatribes on rules, techniques, or other concepts commonly explained in the early stages of learning how to play a musical instrument. Therefore, I quickly engage the students in creating the materials used in becoming familiar with the elements of music, making the process of learning music much more meaningful to them. Very little talking or explaining is done.

Most often I start children playing either a keyboard instrument or recorder. The keyboard works well because all the notes are laid out in a highly visible manner. Also, children with challenges in motor control can often be successful just by finding and pressing the desired key. Recorder works well for some students because it is small, relatively easy to play, and promotes good breath control. Some students will be helped by placing reinforcements on the holes to provide a better tactile sensation as to their locations. Additionally, recorders are very portable and inexpensive – easy to replace if lost. Finally, for those students who come in *really* wanting to learn another instrument such as tuba or trombone, I am glad to start them on those instruments as well.

The therapeutic benefits of communication, social interaction, motor control, etc., that music therapists look for when engaging a child in this expressive art are very important. However, learning how to *play* a musical instrument provides the person a real life key to unlock the door to interacting with others as a musician – perhaps as a soloist or a member of an ensemble. Additionally, being an area of competence is especially important when there may be challenges in other areas such as communication, socialization, academics, etc. Also, music is just plain old fun!

People all over the autism spectrum can learn how to play a musical instrument. My students range from being nonverbal with significant challenges to those with Asperger Syndrome and being hyper verbal.

Finally, I have yet to figure out how to teach children who are *not* on the autism spectrum. Those with autism are so much more predictable and easier to understand!

Biography

Stephen Shore, Ed.D., is an assistant professor at the Ammon School of Education at Adelphi University teaching courses in special education and autism. He focuses his research and teaching on matching best practices to the needs of people with autism.

In addition to working with and talking about life on the autism spectrum, Dr. Shore presents and consults internationally on educational and social inclusion as well as on adult issues pertaining to relationships, employment, advocacy, and disclosure as discussed in his numerous books, articles, and DVDs.

Nonverbal and diagnosed at age two and a half with "Atypical Development and strong autistic tendencies," recommendations for institutionalization were rejected in favor of parent-based intensive early intervention and support.

Dr. Shore serves on the Interagency Autism Coordinating Committee (IACC), on the Board of Directors for Autism Society of America (ASA), as past President of The Asperger's Association of New England (AANE), and advisory board member of Asperger Syndrome and High Functioning Autism Association (AHA), and other autism related organizations.

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