

Make the Most of Music

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Craig is two and a half years old and at the Own Agenda stage of communication. He spends most of his time alone, wandering around the rooms of the house or watching TV. He's usually quiet and rarely responds when someone calls his name, but when he hears music he moves his body and makes babbling sounds that are a lot like singing!

Like so many of us, Craig can't resist the power of music. How many times have you found yourself tapping your foot to the beat of a song or whistling a tune you recently heard? People connect with music in a special way, and that's why many children with ASD respond to music even if they don't react to the sound of your voice.

If your child loves music, it becomes easier for her to learn how to communicate in musical activities, especially songs. The songs we sing are like People Games set to music: they have repetitive words, predictable actions and turns for both you and your child to take. Your child will naturally move her body to the rhythm of a song, which makes it easier for her to perform actions like clapping or jumping up and down. And, because you sing songs over and over, your child has a better opportunity to learn the words.

In this chapter, we will see how you can use music and songs to teach your child to communicate. We will decide what songs you can sing with your child and what turns you both can take. By the end of the chapter, it will be your turn to try composing songs to fit your child's interests and stage of communication.

When you sing songs to your child, she learns to pay attention, copy you and communicate because:

- the words in songs have a specific, predictable order
- songs have repetitive actions that your child can do
- songs make it easy for your child to know what her turn is and when to take it

Songs can help your child interact with other children

There are some songs that everyone knows. These "old standbys," such as "Ring-Around-a-Rosy" and "Head and Shoulders," are sung at most preschools and childcare centres. If your child knows these songs, she can sing along with the other children. Many games played at preschools also depend on music, like Freeze, Hot Potato or Follow the Leader. In these games, the music may motivate your child to join in with the other children (see Musical Games, page 331).

Songs help your child understand the meaning of words by pairing words with actions

The actions you perform in songs help your child understand the meaning of words and that there is a connection between words and actions. For example, in the song "If You're Happy and You Know It," when you sing, "If you're sad and you know it, cry 'boo hoo,'" you pretend to wipe away your tears. And, when you sing "The wheels on the bus go round and round," you make a circular movement with your hand that resembles the spinning of the bus wheels.