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SAY IT WITH A SONG



A STUDENT-CREATED MUSIC PROGRAM HELPS AUTISTIC YOUTH BUILD CONFIDENCE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS.

By *Caitlin Crawshaw*



For someone with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), communicating can be an enormous obstacle and social norms a challenge to decipher. The neurological disease affects one in 150 Canadians, but remains a mystery for scientists and affected families alike. What researchers have found is that music can help some autistic children communicate and adapt socially.

Even at 15, Raymond was already a leader in his school's student council and was very active in his community. While researching local charities for his school to support, he stumbled across research papers indicating that music could help autistic children.

As an accomplished musician with experience teaching music to underprivileged kids, Raymond set out to translate his passion and knowledge of music into a program for autistic youth. "I wanted to teach those who wouldn't normally have a chance to learn and enjoy music."

Raymond approached Saskatoon's Autism Services with his idea—a volunteer-based music instruction program for children ages 3 to 18. The Music Sensory Awakening Program was born in only a few short months and now has 17 participants.

Now in its third year, the program has shown some remarkable results. Each May, the program's students perform musical pieces to an audience of several hundred people at an annual benefit concert, demonstrating both musical and behavioural accomplishments that surprise and thrill their families.

"It's a great feeling to see the smiles on the faces of parents and relatives who see that the child has achieved so much in one year," says Raymond, now studying biology at the University of Saskatchewan.

June Hofmeister is one of those parents. Her 16-year-old son, Jerad, has Asperger Syndrome, a mild form of autism, which affects one's ability to understand social cues and behave accordingly. Over the last two years of taking piano lessons from Raymond, Jerad has not only improved his fine motor skills, but also his self-esteem and confidence. "He actually does very well in front of big crowds of people, when he's participating in the concerts. He has no problem walking up there, sitting down at the piano, and playing away," she says.

But the learning process isn't easy for either the student or the teacher. Raymond and the other volunteer teachers adapt teaching techniques to suit individual students, who are affected by ASD in different ways. Some cannot speak while others struggle with social cues.

"The reason why music works as a form of therapy is the structure and the rigidity of the rhythmic aspect. So much of it has to do with structure. It helps the students focus," says Raymond. He incorporates structure into his teaching methods, like carving 30-minute lessons into five-minute blocks of activity. And while he is guided by what he has learned from research into autism, little of that says much about how to teach music to autistic children. This has led him to develop his own techniques.

After observing the children, Raymond came up with three main learning types: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic (e.g., a child who learns best by hands-on manipulation). "I use colour-coding with numbers and letters to help the students master the keyboard and learn to read notes." Another strategy uses storyboards to illustrate appropriate behaviour.

In the end, it's all about being flexible and patient. "As a teacher, you can't be frustrated with a student. They're always trying their best, and in a way, as a teacher, you're learning from them as well. You're learning to be patient."

With the success of the program, Raymond, who was recently named one of the Top 20 Under 20 by Youth in Motion, plans to spread the Music Sensory Awakening Program

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across Canada.

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