MUSIC THERAPY

Music and music therapy can play a significant role in the lives of children and adolescents in paediatric palliative care (PPC), and their families. Music therapy can support children and adolescents presenting with diverse illnesses and conditions; and may be provided in hospital, in a children’s hospice and/or at home.

Research shows that music therapy is “a multi-faceted experience” [1] that can stimulate and calm, reduce distress and improve the child’s physical state, foster positive experiences, and facilitate family communication. [2] Music therapy can also provide opportunities for creativity, play and fun; and support positive attachment. [3] Case studies about the use of music therapy in PPC note that music therapy can support independence, choice and control [4-6] settle, relax and soothe [7] and provide a sense of normalcy. [8]

Importantly, music and music therapy can support the child or adolescent throughout the palliative care journey, from diagnosis to end-of-life-care, and through changing health and wellbeing. The child or adolescent may actively engage in music making, creation and performance when they are stable and well; and then benefit from receptive music therapy interventions such as music listening or music relaxation when they are too tired or unwell to actively engage. Through education and the provision of resources, the music therapist can also guide families in using music at home to support the child or adolescent.

Music therapists may work with children and families who come from many different cultural and faith backgrounds. Interventions are developed around the individual needs of each child and family, and take into account their beliefs and traditions, as well as their music interests and preferences. [9] Families may still request music therapy for their child even if music is not a significant part of their culture or faith. [10]

Case Story.

Sarah was eight years old when diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumour. When I first met Sarah, she lived at home with her parents and two siblings and was beginning to lose her motor function and vision, which impacted her participation in activities such as school, bike riding and soccer. Sarah appeared very quiet and reserved at this time, and her mother noted that Sarah had become tearful, anxious and withdrawn; and that her siblings missed playing with her.

Sarah and her siblings had all been learning piano and violin at school, and in her early music therapy sessions together, we created, played and recorded known and new songs. Despite her impairments, Sarah was able to actively participate, playing the piano and small percussion instruments, and singing with her siblings. There was much laughter and cheerful discussion during the sessions, and Sarah’s mother noted that this was the first time in a long time that Sarah had been able to do something with her siblings.
As Sarah’s health declined, she lost all motor function and became completely blind. However, her mind remained alert and she loved creating song-stories, (improvised stories set to music). [11] Sarah would select the topic – usually involving her favourite heroines and princes from movies such as *Sleeping Beauty, Aladdin, and The Lion King* - and create wonderful adventures and stories for her characters. The song stories were recorded and Sarah’s mother reported that Sarah listened to these repeatedly between her music therapy sessions.

In her final days of life, Sarah was unsettled. I played Sarah’s favourite songs on my harp for her, using the music to help settle and relax her. The music was familiar and the sound of the harp gentle and soothing, allowing Sarah to feel safe and to know that she was not alone. Recordings of Sarah’s favourite songs were provided for the family, and Sarah’s mother noted that they played these continuously in the last 24 hours of Sarah’s life.

Author: Lucy Forrest, RMT, Music Therapist and Clinical Supervisor

References


10. Forrest LC. The experience of music and music therapy for paediatric palliative care patients and their families, who come from diverse cultural backgrounds. Melbourne: University of Melbourne; 2014.


**CareSearch Resources**

There are resources within CareSearch that could help music therapists (and others) in general and in the care of paediatric palliative patients and their families. Some of them have been highlighted here:

- CareSearch website: [Music Therapists](#)
- There are general Systematic Reviews for [Music therapists](#)
- CareSearch Grey Literature has several abstracts and theses on [paediatric palliative care and music therapy](#).

There are other evidence resources in CareSearch:

- [Find out about research and research resources](#)
- [Use PubMed searches to find the latest studies](#)
- [Check out the Systematic Review Collection](#)