National ASD Survey Study

In October 2012, independent researchers Dr. Petra Kern, Music Therapy Consulting, Dr. Nicole Rivera, North Central College, and Alie Chandler, Ossia Music Therapy Services conducted a survey study on clinical practices and training needs of music therapy practitioners serving individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in collaboration with Marcia Humpal, Chair, Strategic Priority on Music Therapy and ASD.

In this report, we share the survey outcomes with the AMTA Board of Directors. It is our sincere hope that the results will lead to actions such as enhanced information dissemination and advanced professional development opportunities for AMTA members who serve individuals with ASD and their families. The outcomes may also spark discussion on the evidence-based practice level of music therapy.
Executive Summary

Purpose

- to evaluate the current status of music therapy practices for serving clients with ASD, the implementation of national ASD standards and guidelines, the awareness of recent developments, and training needs of music therapists

Method

- Participants: Professional members of AMTA (N=328) working with individuals with ASD
- Study Design: Cross-sectional survey study
- Instrument Design: 45-item online questionnaire accessed through SurveyMonkey®

Results

- Music therapy practices reflect a slightly higher percentage of caseload with ASD; broader age range of clients; trend to serve clients in home and community settings
- Most therapeutic processes align with recommended practices for ASD and incorporate several of the recognized evidence-based practices (e.g., behavioral approach)
- Less understood or recognized are inclusion practices and latest developments in the field of ASD

Demographics of Participants

The typical participant of this study was a female Caucasian, board certified music therapy practitioner with a Bachelor’s degree and 1-5 years of work experience with this population. Most worked in the Great Lakes region.

Table 1. Demographics of AMTA members participating.

Professional Practice

- Compared to a decade ago, the caseload slightly increased.
Most music therapists provide services in public schools (K-12), family homes, private practice (decreasing tendency), or in community settings, which partially reflects the principles of practice guidelines for individuals with ASD.

Clients with ASD seems to be shifting slowly to 12-20 years and older; however, music therapists also see more infants and young children compared to previous years – facts that possibly can be attributed to maturing of clients and increased awareness of the impact of early childhood intervention for this population.
Figure 6. Average duration of music therapy services.

Most music therapy sessions take 30 minutes, typically provided once per week with an average of 1-3 year service duration.

Figure 7. Funding sources of music therapy services.

Music therapy services mainly are funded by private pay, IDEA/Special Education State/County Funding, and grants.

Figure 8. Reasons why music therapists assess individuals with ASD.

Music therapists demonstrate a strong assessment practice, which is in compliance with recommended practices for ASD. Yet, there is no known validated music therapy assessment tool specific to ASD. Therefore, music therapists apply mainly self-created assessment tools and music-therapy or workspace specific assessment tools, while several new and specific tools are emerging.

Figure 9. Goal areas targeted in music therapy sessions with individuals with ASD.

The top three goal areas targeted are communication skills, social skills, and emotional skills (almost not addressed a decade ago). Music therapy clients typically achieve intervention goals within 4-6 months.
AMTA Strategic Priority on Music Therapy and ASD

November 12, 2013

**Figure 10.** Clinical approach applied by music therapists when working with individuals with ASD.

According to research-based practice, most music therapists apply a behavioral approach to music therapy, which is also reflected in the structuring of sessions (i.e., moderately to highly structured). Fewer music therapists reported using Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy or Neurologic Music Therapy, while using computer-based music activities is increasing.

**Evidence-Based Practice**

**Table 2.** Evidence-based practices incorporated in music therapy interventions for individuals with ASD.

- **Participants** applied many of the eleven identified evidence-based practices. Most incorporated prompting, reinforcement, joint attention intervention, and picture schedules in their music therapy sessions.
- **Music therapists** implement all guiding principles of practices for ASD on a very high level, except for serving clients in natural and inclusive environments.
- More than half of the music therapists received training in some of the identified evidence-based practices, which was obtained mainly by education programs outside the field of music therapy. Music therapists indicated receiving training in the principles of practices in a similar ways.

**Figure 11.** Music therapy techniques used by music therapists when working with individuals with ASD.

Music therapy techniques utilized to achieve therapeutic goals are mostly singing and vocalization, instrument play, movement and dance, and free and thematic improvisation.
**About ASD**

*Figure 12.* Identification of core characteristics of ASD according to DSM-IV-TR™.

*Figure 13.* Identification of major shifts in diagnosis of ASD in the new DSM-5™.

*Figure 14.* Identification of current prevalence rate of ASD in the U.S.

*Figure 15.* Proven misconceptions of theories about the causes of ASD.

*Figure 16.* Evidence-based practice level of music therapy.

Most music therapists accurately identified the core characteristics of ASD, the current prevalence rate, theories about the causes, and the key elements and impact of EBP. They were less familiar with more recent developments such as the proposed shifts in diagnosis of ASD as well as the “emerging practice” level of the music therapy profession.
**Recommendations**

Respond to training needs indicated by AMTA members (i.e., implementation of evidence-based practice and on a daily basis, behavioral, sensory, and neurologic approaches to ASD, ways to delivery services for adolescents and young adults with ASD, and recent research outcomes related to ASD and music therapy.

Increase professional development structure (i.e., offer specific training units, mentoring, and improved dissemination of research outcomes).

Empower AMTA Strategic Priority on Music Therapy and ASD to implement recommendations in collaboration with various stakeholders.

**Note**

Summary statements are based on outcomes and comparison to previous studies as well as ASD guidelines and standards (i.e., Chandler, 2004; National Autism Center, 2009; National Research Council, 2001; Register, 2002).


**Acknowledgments**

Credit for this work goes to the research team: Dr. Petra Kern, Dr. Nicole Rivera, Alie Chandler, and Marcia Humpal.