

## WHAT LINKS CAN BE MADE BETWEEN RELATIONSHIPS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND MUSIC THERAPY PRACTICE?

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper analyzes the most important theories linked to early childhood development and how music therapy can address and support communication and attachment challenges. This study combines fundamental theories in attachment, attunement, communicative musicality while illustrating these concepts through case study vignettes.*

### Keywords:

*Music therapy; Childhood; Attachment; Attunement; Communicative Musicality; Creativity.*

### Introduction

Music therapy can be a useful tool in pediatric interventions and has been used successfully in different settings (Stegemann, 2019). While the benefits of music therapy are diverse, it is also important to underline the complex and unpredictable nature of music therapy, which is also relevant in working with children. One of the aspects, which illustrate the complexity of music therapy, is the heterogeneous and numerous theories that underpin the work that music therapists undertake (Hillecke et al., 2005).

There are also a variety of music therapy approaches, which are sometimes further complicated by different cultural and national settings or laws. Each country and culture has distinct attributes that influence the way they define and experience music, which has a direct impact on music therapy practice worldwide (Whitehead-Pleaux, 2015). For example, in Romania there is a significant population of Roma people, and the writers have worked with children from this background, and had to

learn about their musical beliefs, practices and communication style, which may differ to those of indigenous Romanians.

All these aspects are relevant to music therapy with children, and in order to achieve positive outcomes, there is a need to understand and apply the most important theories and concepts to child development and psychotherapy models. This paper succinctly presents some of the fundamental theories in developmental psychology and psychotherapy, which are specifically influenced by practice in the UK where the authors have trained. The paper has an emphasis on early childhood relationships while linking them to practical music therapy examples, thus illustrating the connection between theories with practice.

### **Theories and approaches of music therapy**

Music therapy is a multi-disciplinary domain, closely linked to psychotherapy. There are many psychological therapies (Imel, 2015), but among the most widely known are cognitive behavioral therapy, and in the case of music therapy, humanistic relational approaches, psychodynamic therapy, and music-centered therapy approaches. In the following section, we will present the models that we consider most relevant from our music therapy training experiences. For example, a range of Psychodynamic models focuses on helping clients have an in-depth insight into what drives their relationships and feelings, and is usually based on freely discussing the client's thoughts and feelings (Shedler, 2010). Music therapy can be a valuable part of psychodynamic therapy sessions, as clients may find that music may build relationships more easily than words. This can especially be the case if a child does not have developed language, is developmentally very young, or finds putting their feelings into words very difficult (Storz, 2014). One of the most relevant psychodynamic approaches for this research is the Analytical Music Therapy model, developed by Mary Priestley, who proposed a guided expression of music, through which the client could express his inner world (Priestley, 2011). Music therapists who use this model strive to help their clients focus on the process of music therapy (Priestley & Eschen, 2002). Humanistic approaches (Rogers, 1995) promote unconditional positive regard, which is especially important in working with children, but also with all people. Therefore, music therapy can have a humanistic approach, integrating part of Carl Roger's principles, but using a non-verbal language to communicate and interact (Ruud, 2010).

While all the above-mentioned therapy approaches can be integrated within music therapy sessions and vice versa, it is essential to note that there are also music-centered approaches. The principal difference in music-centered approaches is that the actual music experience is not just a therapy tool but also a therapy goal (Aigen, 2005). The Nordoff-Robbins model reflects the music-centered approach, in which musical

goals become therapy goals, and the musical experience is the driving force that promotes wellbeing (Aigen, 2014). However, Pavlicevic had a slightly different view on music therapy, observing that there is also a need for verbal analysis and that in some instances, music can even hinder the therapeutic process, especially if the client is a musician that tends to focus more on the music itself (Pavlicevic, 1997).

After presenting some of the essential models in psychotherapy and their relevance in music therapy, the following information will be dedicated to exploring some of the key concepts in developmental theory, and the way in which early childhood relationships have a lasting impact and can be addressed through music therapy.

### **Attachment and relationships**

The most relevant theories to this paper are the ones related to early childhood relationships, such as the relationship between an infant and its caregiver. One of the key concepts in this regard is attachment theory. This aspect is of particular interest foremost to try and repair attachment difficulties that clients might face. Two of the most important names in attachment theory are John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, who have extensively studied how mother-infant relationships can impact all future relationships. Based on Bowlby's theories and observations, an infant and young child needs to have a warm, satisfying, and positive relationship to grow up mentally healthy (Bowlby, 1951). Moreover, the attachment pattern is strongly linked to how the parents or caregiver treated the child (Bowlby, 2005: 139). As a development of Bowlby's research, Mary Ainsworth identified three principal forms of attachment: secure, insecure ambivalent, and insecure resistant (Ainsworth & Witting, 1969).

One of the aspects that seemed relevant is Bowlby's emphasis on the importance of a social support system for the mother, which is often overlooked in today's society. A few years ago, while volunteering as a community musician, one of the writers encountered a difficult situation in which an exhausted and burned out single mother decided to abandon her 7-year-old ill daughter in the hospital. The daughter had a severe chronic illness, which required frequent hospital stays and an increased economic burden on the mother, who had two other children, and no childcare help. This decision seemed inconceivable, as the child suffered greatly from being separated from her mother, and this distress appeared to worsen her symptoms, as she passed away a few days later. During the little girl's hospitalization, the therapist tried to use music to soothe her emotional pain, and she seemed to enjoy the therapist's company and listening to music. However, as soon as the therapist left the room, the little girl would start crying. Even though it was a painful experience that the therapist will never forget, having the opportunity to talk to the mother highlighted the

fact that these types of situations are hardly ever black and white. The therapist saw a mother who broke down under the pressure of caring for an ill child while also raising two other children and working to sustain her family. In this case, a support system would have allowed this mother to continue caring for her ill child, and would have prevented a difficult situation for both the mother and child. Over the years, this therapist wondered if the child had not passed away, whether music therapy sessions could have aided her in dealing with the profound loss that she had experienced when her mother abandoned her. Based on Bowlby's theory, the therapist, like a mother, can provide a secure base for exploring and provide the framework for a person to self-heal (Bowlby, 1979).

Music therapy can provide a significant support in early development by developing a secure attachment, through vocal improvisations, lullabies and musical interactions (Edwards, 2011b). There have been notable developments in music therapy practice supporting caregivers in vulnerable situations to bond with infants, such as the *Sing & Grow* program in Australia (Abad & Williams, 2007). In an article by Jane Edwards (2011a), we are presented with some of the reasons for which early childhood relationships and infant attachment are closely linked to music therapy. First of all, various studies point to the fact that babies can differentiate between diverse pitches and may prefer *music to speech*. Also, parents and caregivers may distinguish the infant's preference to vocal singing and use it as a means of connection. These musical interactions are important for the bonding process between infant and caregiver, and the lack of such emotional musicality could indicate an emotional challenge of the caregiver (Robb, 1999). Although music therapy is important in these early developmental stages, it can also benefit adults needing emotional support, especially since the musical experience can provide a supportive and meaningful interpersonal relationship experience and communication. In music therapy practice, *grounding*, a musical technique based on Wigram's practical recommendations for music therapy practice (Wigram, 2017), could provide a secure musical base, as the feeling of predictability of repetition can make us feel safe. From an attachment point of view, this musical grounding can be linked to the early need of an infant to be held, which creates a safe environment. Furthermore, an infant can have an enhanced bond with its mother or caregiver through the regular pulse of music, further highlighting the positive aspects of engaging musically from an early age (Nakata & Trehub, 2004). In this regard, people who had attachment challenges and may face communication difficulties could benefit from music therapy, as musical improvisation is important for revealing the communication condition of both the therapist and client (Pavlicevic, 2010).

An illustrative example is one of the writer's experiences in conducting music therapy sessions with a little girl that was disabled and struggling with anxiety. From the very first sessions, it was observed that the little girl's anxiety stemmed from a lack of secure base and her attachment appeared to be insecure ambivalent (Ainsworth & Witting, 1969). For example, the therapist noticed that the client tended to act out and become overly upset to get her father's attention. As a result, the therapist decided to address this insecurity and a close relationship between the therapist and the little girl soon developed. The insecure attachment was noticed most by the therapist before her departure, when she often noticed visible anxiety in the little girl. As a solution to the fear and separation anxiety, the therapist tried to write a goodbye song that summed up their time together and prepared the little girl for the moment of separation. The goal of this song was to give the little girl a secure message that they would meet again in the following week. This activity had a calming effect on the little girl and provided a sense of security for the rest of the sessions (Baker, 2005). The client quickly memorised the text of the song, which showed how much it meant to her. In essence, it can be concluded that the goodbye song represented a secure base of healthy attachment, reinforcing feelings of safety and caring.

### **Affect attunement**

Closely linked to attachment theory is the concept of *affect attunement*, which was developed by Daniel Stern (Stern, 1998). While attachment refers to the emotional bond between caregiver and child, attunement illustrates how a caregiver responds to the infant's cues. Based on Stern's research, infants experience a sense of efficacy when their caregivers recognize and affirm them. The term "vitality affects" was coined by Stern and referred to the dynamic, almost imperceptible link between emotions and physical actions, which an infant perceives and processes (Pais, 2016). When a caregiver satisfies an infant's need, this exchange can provide a secure base for emotional development. This aspect is particularly important, as interpersonal interactions influence cognition, which impacts social interaction (Walchs & Gruen, 1982). As in the case of attachment, therapy (including creative therapies) can provide a basis for vitality affects, which can help a client aim for positive change (Holmqvist et al., 2019). Since some of the first relationships in an infant's life are based on musical experiences, music therapy has the unique possibility of addressing and healing various attachment and emotional difficulties linked to early childhood.

While volunteering at a Children's Rehabilitation Hospital in Oradea, Romania, one of the writers observed the positive outcomes of using non-verbal therapy methods in promoting vitalisation. The children that attended the group music therapy session had different special needs and at first seemed to display avoidant behaviour,

which in some cases may have been due to an insecure attachment. In Romania, there are numerous instances in which children with special needs are left for weeks in the hospital and as a result, they often feel abandoned and anxious, and display signs of attachment challenges. As a result, during the sessions, the therapist let them choose their own instruments and also encouraged them to lead the musical improvisation, which seemed to have helped overcome their initial resistance and promote a sense of security.

Another illustrative example is the impact that music therapy and the importance of affect attunement among children with autism. Music is often the most immediate way to reach a child with autism. Since neurodivergent children may find communication and social interaction particularly challenging, another difficulty is sensory processing (Hodges, 2017). While working with a child that was identified as autistic on the autistic spectrum, one of the writers experienced how music had the power to enhance a social connection with the child through the therapist's attunement to the child's affect (mood). Aspects like eye contact, a smile, or a response, which otherwise these were difficult to elicit, through musical improvisations and singing, they became easier and more frequent. During the sessions, the therapist realised that the aim of these musical interactions between the therapist and the client were not only to improve the social or communicative development of the client, but also to achieve her emotional and mental well-being through affect attunement. As children with autism experience increased isolation due to challenges in communication and social interactions, these musical interactions became a positive experience for the client, and they provided emotional uplift, hope and a sense of psychological security.

### **Communicative musicality**

This vignette also highlights some aspects of another relevant theory, *communicative musicality*, which was advanced by Stephen Malloch and Colwyn Trevarthen (Black, 2010; Daynes, 2010). The three fundamental components underlined by Malloch and Trevarthen are pulse, understood as specific behavioral moments in a certain timeframe; quality, viewed as the volume, timber, pitch, direction and intensity of these moments; and narrative structure, meaning the shared experienced during these moments. These components were observed in interactions among groups of toddlers to determine their importance in early childhood relationships and the researches observed that through matching pulse and quality, children obtained a sense of togetherness, and through the common narrative structure, they bonded (Nome, 2018). These early interactions, based in musical and emotional components underline the importance of social life even in early childhood,

and the way in which music can create valuable shared experiences. Furthermore, the "vitality affects" that Stern observed are further envisioned by Malloch and Trevarthen as the basis from which musicality, understood as meaningful communication and born musical attributes, develop. Musicality is linked to the intersubjective sharing of experience (Stensæth & Trondalen 2012), and is credited with developing social emotionality. The authors suggest that humans are born with a capacity to process and produce music, which is a way to communicate.

One of the writers, as a music therapist, practically experienced this theory at the Children's Rehabilitation Hospital in Romania, during music therapy sessions with children that had various disabilities. During one particular session, a 7-year-old girl with multiple physical and cognitive disabilities, who appeared to be non-verbal, participated in the group session. At first, she did not seem to respond to any of the musical activities unfolding during the session and appeared disengaged. However, upon closer observation, every time the therapist sang her name during a group improvisation, there was a small twitch in her mouth and a slight spasm in her right hand. She could not hold an instrument by herself, but her older sister, who was next to her, rang a handbell each time the little girl's name was mentioned. During that session, the therapist understood that music could increase engagement and solicit responses, even in apparently small ways, in children who struggle with complex disabilities. Observing that little girl, the therapist wondered what her internal universe looked like and how she would respond if she had the strength and ability to participate in the session physically. Two minimal vitality gestures appeared to show communication during a music-making activity.

Another illustrative example in this sense was experienced by one of the writers of this article. In this case, the therapist witnessed the benefits of communicative musicality in music therapy sessions with a girl that was autistic. The 8 year old girl had difficulty connecting and attaching to the therapist, hardly verbalising any specific emotion or thought. As a result, the therapist had difficulty communicating with this client because the little girl rarely responded to any questions or actions. This situation changed when the therapist sat alongside the child, rather than facing her, and started talking to her in a singing way during a watercolour painting session. The little girl responded to the therapist singing by singing herself. Surprisingly, the client sang in response to what the therapist was saying or telling her, thus creating an important communication channel. For example, the therapist was talking about what she is painting, what color she used, and in response, the girl responded using the same musical material, telling what she was planning to paint, what she saw in her painting, and any related thoughts to the art process. This back and forth singing conversation went on for some time. The client reflected surprise, excitement and then joy during

the communication, and appeared joyful that she could have such an interaction with someone else. This musical communication proved to be the first sustained conversation between the client and therapist, and had a great impact on the relationship between them, which further developed in subsequent sessions. The musical communication also encouraged the client to explore further interactions, and helped her allow the therapist to become closer to her (Borzási, Warner & Váduva, 2023).

### **Creativity and play**

Another significant theme that seemed to be relevant to early childhood development, but also in all the music therapy sessions with children and adolescents that the writers have experienced was creativity and play. Donald Winnicott studied the relevance and impact of play and creativity (Winnicott, 1991), considering that play is a critical part of human experience. Playing can help develop creativity and can be used as a means of communication for both children and adults. Playing individually can help a child develop while playing with someone else, for example, the caregiver can teach the child social relations (Abram 2017). Even though Winnicott was known as a psychoanalyst and pediatrician, he also appreciated and used music throughout his life, which is significant for music therapy. He played the piano and sang vocally, and sometimes even ended his day playing a piano (Levinge, 2015). This aspect is significant because it illustrates the importance of music when words cannot adequately express feelings or experiences. Based on the theory of creativity and play, research has shown that these integrated therapies can help children to deal with diverse emotions (Moreno, 1985). An illustrative example of a play and music therapy intervention was during a music therapy session on the Pediatric Oncology ward in Oradea. One of the writers was working with a 5-year-old child who had a diagnosis of both cystic fibrosis and cancer, and the treatment for both these illnesses proved to be extremely complex, so she had to be in the hospital for prolonged periods. The hospital room was filled with her favorite toys, and both parents were present most of the time, so their music therapy sessions sometimes included the whole family. Play can help children achieve a degree of normalcy despite the hospital setting and can decrease their anxiety (Kottman, 2011), and this aspect was visible in this child's case, as each music therapy session started with the therapist and little girl playing in an unstructured format. After playing with toys, the therapist would start incorporating music into the sessions, and often, the little girl would sing about her toys and enjoy making up melodies about their creative play. During one session, the little girl decided to give each of her parents an instrument and asked them to sing while playing with her toys. It was a very emotional



time, as the whole family came together through music and play, while the therapist took a step back and let this activity unfold.

Another illustrative study in this regard was carried out to see how music, art and play therapy can make a difference to the emotional wellbeing of chronically ill children who have had to spend a lot of time in hospital (Văduva & Balla, 2019). This project lasted for nine months, and during this time, the therapists organized individual and group therapies with hospitalized children. At the end of this project, which was analyzed through clinical observation sheets, it became evident that music and art therapy had a beneficial effect on these children, reducing their anxiety and increasing their level of joy. The research highlighted the need to provide emotional support in Romania for children undergoing prolonged hospital stays and medical procedures. This emotional support is just as important as supporting their physical health.

### **Constructivist and social constructivist theories**

Also relevant to music therapy and early childhood relationships are the modern developmental theories, which further develop and continue the existing theories and were developed in relation to the ontology and epistemological views of qualitative research. For example, both the constructivist and the social constructivist research paradigms are based on a subjective view of knowledge; but there are some differences in their approach. The first model, constructivist, envisions that knowledge resides in the human individual, while the second model of social constructivism, believes that knowledge develops in a social context (Sommers-Flanagan, J. & Sommers-Flanagan, R., 2015). The founder of the constructivist model is considered John Dewey, who proposed that children learn through experience and creativity, as opposed to memorizing and repeating knowledge (Heilbronn, 2018.). The social constructivist model of development dates back to Lev Vygotsky and is based on an individual learning style, and each child's developmental stage (Smidt, 2009). The writers believe that in Romania, this theory is overlooked and is rarely modeled in the classroom. Romanian teachers tend to take a position that could be considered harsher and have expectations of uniformity within their class. An example in which both the constructivist and the social constructivist approaches were successfully applied within a therapeutic music session was during the work of one of the writers with an eight years old child who had significant math problems. His challenge in math and other school subjects were because he had missed a lot of school while undergoing cancer treatment. The therapist was referred to work with him primarily to help with symptoms of anxiety, but he mentioned his schooling struggles during their sessions. The therapist enlisted the help of two drums to play with this client, and they started counting beats. This activity soon turned into an enjoyable game that they played

during each session, and the counting game developed into an adding and subtracting game, and then a multiplication game. This learning model, which was seen as a game, decreased the anxiety linked to schooling, and the child-led approach helped the client develop his math skills successfully and without anxiety.

### **Transactional analysis**

Eric Berne developed another modern psychology theory called *transactional analysis* (Berne, 1968), which highlights the complex form of human communication and how social interaction can impact children's and adults' emotions and actions. Berne draws upon the observation that each person deals with three ego states: Parental, Child, and Adult, which each individual will at some point exhibit in life, and also can pass through the different states at any age, over a short period of time (Berne, 1968: 20). One of the writers find this theory particularly relevant to her work with a bereaved adolescent who experienced grief after losing his father to cancer. The child was 12 years when they began the music therapy sessions and he often displayed a mixture of Parental and Child states, depending on their activity. As anxiety about death usually appears around age 10 (Balla, 2013), the therapist was aware that her client was struggling to understand his feelings towards mortality, especially since losing a beloved parent. The therapist noticed that when he used music to express himself, the Child state would be more visible in the child. For example, during musical communication, the client would act more playful, would joke and laugh quite often. However, in discussions, the Parental state was more visible. In this case, the client seemed to remember his burdens and be more withdrawn and serious. Considering these aspects, songwriting proved to be an important outlet for grief, while musical improvisation appeared to help the client show his playful and child-like side.

### **Conclusion**

This paper aimed to present a synthesis of the what the authors consider to be most relevant theories linked to child development psychology, and psychosocial music therapy approaches within this context. The scope of this overview was to provide relevant information that underpins the practical aspects of music therapy with children and adolescents, linking music therapy to early childhood relationships. Also, the paper presents some of the critical aspects of developmental and attachment psychology, with short vignettes that illustrate the means in which music therapy can be applied while working with children and adolescents.

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